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MAJOR BULLION, Boss of the Tigers;



OR, JUPITER JUNK'S LAST INNING.

A CURIOUS CASE OF
Solon Shook, the Clue-Finder.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN COLDGRIP" NOVELS,
"PLUSH VELVET," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A RAINY NIGHT'S MYSTERY.

It was what might be called a disagreeable night in New York.

Rain had fallen from sundown, and a cold wind, biting in its intensity, swept down the

A YOUTH, BARELY TWENTY AND KEENLY HANDSOME, STOOD BEFORE THE
ASTONISHED JUPITER JUNK.

pavements and sought out the hidden places dimly lighted by the lamps and drove the few pedestrians under cover.

It was a very bad night to be out and Roundsman Coover, veteran that he was, wished there was no such thing as patrolling a beat, and no occasion to be watchful, in such weather.

He had taken the liberty to shelter his portly figure in a doorway and had thus escaped the water, though the chill air found his very bones.

There was no one for him to watch at that hour, though he stood on dangerous ground, and he had seen no one for half an hour.

The last person noted by the roundsman was Tommy Flyer, a privileged character in that quarter—a little boy with a very old face on his shoulders and a pair of far-seeing eyes in his head.

Master Flyer was an artful dodger of the latest pattern, and his nest—it could not be called a home—was within stone's throw of where Coover stood, or just back of the building whose doorway sheltered him.

"Would you mind it, sir, to come with me?"

The voice seemed to spring from the pavement at the policeman's feet.

Roundsman Coover leaned forward and got a breath of the gust in his face.

"Me" was a diminutive figure on the sidewalk in the light of the nearest lamp and looking quite like a little ghost.

Coover saw the tattered shawl that clung to the shoulders despite the efforts of the wind to sweep it off, and the bright eyes that burned above a pair of very white and very wet cheeks.

"Don't you know me? I'm Miss Nappers."

Coover smiled at the designation.

"Miss" Nappers certainly was not past thirteen.

He had seen her before, had seen her in company with Tommy Flyer after dark and sometimes pretty late.

"What has happened?" and the policeman drew back in the doorway for he did not like the idea of going out in the rain. "If it's a fight in the Nest, girl—"

"Oh, it's no fight in the Nest," was the interruption. "It's a good deal worse than that. It's a dead man, sir."

"You don't say? Where is it?"

By "it" Coover meant the body, a way he had of referring to the dead.

"It's lying in one of the upper rooms of the Coop, sir. He belongs there—that is, he's been in the Coop for some few months; and I happened to find him dead on the floor."

"You found him, eh?"

"I did, sir—found him dead, you see, and I think to myself: I'll just run and find Mr. Coover what keeps this beat—"

"Goodness me! what a night to find a man dead on the floor," exclaimed Thomas Coover as he thought of the little Coovers at home. "It must 'ave frightened you, Nappers."

"Miss Nappers, if you please, not bare Nappers," spoke up the girl. "You're going to do something, ain't you?"

Coover looked out at the prospect, and saw that the rain had slackened a little and that the wind had fallen a bar.

"Of course; it's my duty, you see," and he pulled the collar of his rubber up round his throat and took the child's hand.

"In the Coop, eh?" he said, looking down at her. "You don't live there, do you, Nap—Miss Nappers, I mean?"

"No, sir, but I had business there awhile ago, and that's how I came to find him dead on the floor."

"What's his name?"

"I—I never heard it, I believe. He's been kind of secretive ever since landing there; he seemed to blow into the Coop, you see, and he found the room empty and took it. People often drift in that way and settle there awhile."

"Just so, miss; but here we are! Why, the place is dark."

The Coop was a ramshackle affair, known to every person who had anything to do with that part of the city.

It was a human bee-hive, sheltering many families and people without families, and in its dark little room many a life's secret was as secure as if under lock and key.

"Of course it's dark; it's late, you know," said the little girl.

It was past midnight, and Coover did not have to glance at his watch to know this.

The two entered the building, and Nelly Nappers found her way to the rickety staircase.

"There's a gleam of light on the second landing, for Mother Bluebottle's sick and runs a night lamp," said Miss Nappers. "We can find the next flight without any trouble, and from there it'll be easy."

She led the way up-stairs, and Coover found it as she had predicted.

Still led by the child, the big patrolman pushed on until she turned to him and laid one of her skeleton hands upon a door that stood slightly ajar.

"He's in there," said she in a whisper. "Will you go in first?"

Of course a man without fear like Thomas Coover, twenty years on the force and accustomed to scenes of all kinds, went forward and opened the door.

"The light was dim that way when I left," he heard Nappers say. "You can turn it on a little. He lies on the floor at the foot of the bed—"

"Why, your man's a woman, Miss Nappers."

A strange cry came from the child outside the door.

"A what?—A woman?" said she, springing forward, but, even at the portal hesitating and clinging to the jamb, with the whitest of faces.

"And she's in a chair, too," responded the policeman, pointing at an object already seen by the girl.

"It was a man—a man on the floor—when I went off," declared she. "I can't believe it, sir."

"But you have eyes and bright ones, too, as I know. Come in and see for yourself."

Little Miss Nappers advanced, her black eyes seeming ready to quit her head, and all at once stopped in front of the chair and looked up at the policeman.

"Where's the man?" she asked.

"Bless you, child, I don't know. You might have been mistaken, you see—"

"No, no; there's too much difference between a man on the floor and a woman in a chair. No, he was lying there dead, for I went over and put my hand on his face to feel that it was cold—just like the face of a dead person. But, that's a woman there—any one can see that; but she don't belong to the Coop."

"There's a good many chicks in the Coop, miss."

"An' I know 'em all, from Mother Bluebottle to the little man who makes diamonds in the last room over us."

"Makes diamonds, eh?"

"Oh, yes—Old Oliver. Never mind him, now, Mr. Coover. Is she dead?"

Called to a sense of his duty in the premises, Coover bent over the figure in the chair.

It was that of a woman of perhaps five and thirty.

The pallor of death had lessened her beauty but little; it had brought out with more emphasis the Grecian mold of the fair features, and Coover saw that in life she had been very handsome and was so still.

Nelly Nappers drew closer while he made his inspection.

He raised one of the hands that hung down beside the chair, but almost immediately let it fall again.

It was cold and pulseless!

Thomas Coover had attended a good many inquests; he had heard the testimony of men learned in medicine, therefore he aired his own knowledge of such things a little when he turned to Miss Nappers and announced that "*rigor mortis*" had set in some time before.

"*Rigor mortis*, Mr. Tom?" asked the child. "Does that kill people?"

"Well," answered the policeman, drawing a long breath. "It's certain death, I should say."

"Oh, I can see that," and Nelly Nappers looked into his face, which looked whiter than ever in the glare of the jet overhead. "She don't b'long to the Coop, for, as I've said, I know 'em all. But, what's become of the man?"

Policeman Coover hopelessly shook his head.

"It's a mystery if you saw a dead man on the floor," he began, and the child nodded emphatically. "Of course, if he was dead he couldn't kill this woman and then get away."

"It seems so to me. Dead men tell no tales, Mother Bluebottle says, and if they can't tell tales how can they quit a house after they're dead, without the coroner's help?"

"You reason like a little philosopher. Hello, there's blood on the floor here!"

"There's where his body lay when I found it."

The bulky figure of Thomas Coover was stooping over a certain spot in the carpetless floor, and his fat fore-finger was touching a dark stain on the boards.

"What are you going to do?" asked Nelly.

"Just what my duty tells me to do," was the reply. "Perhaps you ought to remain here till I come back to see that another mysterious transformation doesn't take place."

"You don't think one will, do you?"

"I don't know what I think," smiled Coover. "You know when you came into the room it was a man on the floor, but that when I came it was a woman dead in the man's chair."

"It's funny, isn't it? But I'll stay, Mr. Tom."

Coover took another look at the dead woman, in which he noticed that she was well-dressed in a close-fitting habit, dark and plain, and that there were no marks of violence about the body so far as he could see, and then he stepped to the door.

"You won't be gone long, will you?"

"Not ten minutes. It won't take me long to send in an alarm and then you'll be relieved."

Coover drew the door close and vanished.

He had to feel his way down the stairways of the Coop with some care.

It was, indeed, a very mysterious affair, and he could only account for what he had seen of it by believing that Nelly Nappers had been so excited that she scarcely knew what she saw during her first visit.

The woman might have been lying on the floor then, and afterward dragged herself, or been carried, to the chair. He was quite certain that little Miss Nappers had not seen a dead man on the floor, although the gout of blood there perplexed him.

"It's something for Shook if he's in the city," muttered Coover when he reached the lower landing. "I'd like to make it a 'scoop' for Solon; but, confound it all, I'll have to send in the alarm, and the chances are that some of the others will get the case and murder it. Shook went off after a tangle somewhere, three months ago, since when I haven't heard a word from him, but—Hello! beg your pardon, sir."

The policeman's last words were occasioned by his running against some one in the semi-darkness of the hallway.

He saw a figure slip out the door, leaving it open, and without accepting the apology offered.

In another second Coover was on the sidewalk, but he heard no one.

He carried out his intentions at once, and without waiting for a reply went back to the Coop.

He ran up stairs as briskly as his avoirdupois would let him, and burst into the room where he had left little Nippers on guard.

"Did I stay long?" he exclaimed. It didn't take me ten minutes to send word in that—Heavens! the chit's gone!"

It was true; there was no one in the room but himself and the silent occupant of the chair.

Nelly Nappers had disappeared.

CHAPTER II.

THREE VERY BLACK BIRDS.

"ALL alone, are you?"

"Yes, and have been that way for two hours."

"Jupiter hasn't come back yet?"

"You can see."

It was the same night that Policeman Coover, by the help of little Miss Nappers, had made his startling discovery in the Coop, that the foregoing brief conversation took place between two men who occupied a

sumptuously furnished room in a fashionable part of the city, not very far from the spire of Trinity.

The first speaker, who had just entered the room, was a man about thirty, well dressed, with a youthful face, though somewhat dark, and with a keen and cunning eye, indicative of much natural acumen.

The other man, somewhat older, he had found in the room.

He had been taking his ease, for the chamber was well filled with fragrant tobacco-smoke and a half-smoked cigar still claimed a place between thumb and finger.

We have said that he was older than the first person briefly described.

He might have been ten years his senior.

His features were clear-cut and Grecian; there was a look of loftiness about him, and his face, unlike that of the other, was white unto pallor.

The clothes worn by both men were good and fitted their persons to a dot.

The eldest had a full beard which was shiny black while the other wore a mustache, the ends of which were slightly waxed.

"I thought Jupiter would have been here by this time," continued the younger as he helped himself from the cigar box on the table and dropped easily into a chair.

"Oh, I don't know; give him time. It's raining, isn't it? Your clothes smell damp."

"Yes, it's been at it for an hour."

"You came in a cab, then?"

"Had to or get wet, you see."

"That's right. Jupiter will probably do the same."

"That is if he has sense enough."

The white-faced man turned slowly upon the speaker and regarded him fiercely for a moment.

"You never liked Jupiter," he said and took another pull at the Cubana.

"I never did and never will!" was the retort. "I don't have to like him."

"Of course not; you don't have to sleep with Jupiter. You know that, Mr. Spiders."

"Why do you go back to that name? Is it to taunt me?"

"Not at all; wouldn't do that for the world."

It was evident that the younger man did not more than half believe this assertion for he gave the other one a hard look and then let his face relax a little.

"Jupiter may be all right—"

"I'll vouch for him. You don't have to do anything of the kind. I know the man."

"It's deuced well that some one knows him to that extent. He's liable to come in at any time, you say?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll go down to Daly's and get supper."

"Just as you please; but, here he comes now."

Mr. Spiders looked toward the door, and the next moment it opened to admit a big, burly man with atlantean shoulders, a darkish face and piercing black eyes which were as restless as a dervish.

He slouched into the room, but the following instant stopped and dived his hand into the box.

He pulled a cigar out, in a vengeful manner, and bit the end off like a half-famished tiger.

There was a good deal of the animal in this man.

He could be a brute when required, and his build told that he had never passed through the furnace of refinement.

Another thing: he seemed out of place with the other men.

His garments did not fit him and his hat was beaten in and well slouched.

He spoke to the man at the table and then threw a hurried look toward a clock that ticked on the mantel across the room.

After this he shook himself like a dog and a good deal of moisture fell upon the Brussels carpet.

It was evident that Jupiter, if this was he, had come to the house afoot, or had walked at least a part of the distance.

"Wet old night," said he, looking through the first puff of smoke at the eldest man. "I had to wait awhile longer than I expected to, you see."

"There was no particular hurry, Jupiter. All's well, eh?"

The other nodded.

"You can go over yonder and dry your clothes."

"Guess I will," and Spiders watched the man slouch across the room and draw a chair up to the grate.

He thought it a good time to go down to supper, for he picked up his hat and started toward the door.

Jupiter heard the movement and the next instant he had turned in his chair.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Spiders," he said. "I'm in need of money."

Spiders stopped and looked at the other man.

"The major there is the paymaster, you know—"

"Hang it all! don't you never pay your share?" cried the black beard, scowling.

"You don't expect him to settle all the bills and then hope to come in at the close for the lion's share?"

Spiders flushed and with difficulty suppressed an oath.

"I'll be back when I have finished my supper," he said.

"Champagne and ortolans for one," growled the man at the grate. "You have the good times all to yourself. I know you, Marcus Spiders. There was a time when you didn't have these good times and when—"

Spiders came across the room with his hands clinched till the gloves burst asunder.

Jupiter sat glum and threatening in the chair, looking from under his bushy brows at Spiders.

"You heard what I said, eh?" he went on. "I say there was a time when you didn't have the chance to give yourself suppers at Delmonico's and it wasn't so very long ago, either."

Spiders looked at the major in a mute appeal for interference; but that worthy was blowing smoke-rings toward the ceiling and seemed disposed to let Jupiter have his own way.

"Never mind, Mr. Spiders; time will come when Jupiter Junk will have his wine suppers and his midnight bouts without any one to bleed his purse. Go ahead and have a nice time while the wind lays! I don't drink your high-priced stuff and eat your terrapin. You can have 'em, for all I keer. You're Marcus Spiders and dresses in fine broadcloth, and I'm Jupiter Junk and wears what you see on my back; but by Jove! I'd sooner be me with all my rags than you with your kids and—and— Well, your sins!"

The termination of Jupiter's sentence made the major laugh.

He looked at Spiders, whose face was quite white, and observed:

"You must admit that Jupiter is something of a philosopher, Spiders. He doesn't mean any wrong, but—"

"Let him keep his opinions to himself, then."

"Oh, go and get your supper! You can't quarrel worth a copper on an empty stomach," put in Jupiter. "Throw me another cigar, major; I've bitten this one in two."

Spiders turned away nettled to the quick by the *sangfroid* of the man at the fire, and when he reached the hall he heard in the room a laugh that drove every vestige of color from his face.

"Just wait!" he hissed, looking at the door and shaking his fist at it. "Just wait a little while longer, Mr. Junk! When I am ready there will be a play that will put you forever beyond reach of doing me an injury or taunting me about my past. It's not quite as black as yours; but, never mind that! I will show you that spiders can kill as quickly as the tigers in the jungles, and—oh, you infernal villain! I'd give a cool thousand for a chance to catch you under the beard right now."

The door had no sooner closed upon the form of Marcus Spiders than Jupiter rose and came toward the table.

One of his hands he had busied in his bosom, and the man at the table seemed to be waiting for it to be withdrawn.

"I'll have to throttle him some day—I know it," he remarked. "The world, big as it is, is too little for both of us. But, this isn't business. I had a time."

The hand came out and clutched something that looked like a little package done up in oiled silk.

"But you succeeded, Jupiter?"

"Didn't I enter the game for that purpose?"

"Of course, and didn't I believe all the time that you would carry out the plan?"

"Is this it?"

He placed the packet upon the table at the major's elbow, and that person laid down his cigar.

"I'll see in a moment," said he glancing up at the other. "It won't take me half a second to verify it."

Jupiter Junk folded his arms and seemed to study a landscape on the opposite wall.

The handsome man—Major Bullion he was called in some circles—undid the wrappings of the package and stopped.

"You wrapped this up, did you, Jupiter?"

A nod was the response.

"Then you had to take it by force?"

"What makes you think so?"

"This," and the major's finger touched a little red spot on the wrappings.

Jupiter bent nearer and smiled.

"That's so, I had to use some force; but you told me, you know—"

"Yes, yes."

"I went after it and it was there."

Major Bullion returned to the package which he carefully unwrapped, disclosing an oblong box the lid of which seemed to be fastened down with pink tape sealed with a wax seal at one side where it was tied.

"You're a trump, Jupiter!"

"Ain't I? And that dude who just went out would like to strangle me!"

Major Bullion smiled and went to work at the tape.

"Did he resist very much?" he asked.

"Some," answered Jupiter, sententiously.

"He was pretty strong; but, what are hands and cunning for?"

"That's it, that's it, Jupiter. Did you—"

The question did not need finishing, for the eyes of the two men met.

"Yes, I had to," and Jupiter Junk's eyes got a fierce light for an instant. "Never mind. Don't let anything bother you. I did it decently and in order. The box was there and I had to get it to-night. You said so. It was a regular old maze—never saw its like before. There was a stairway that creaked and rattled, and rooms with doors half way open, and children running about the halls like mice and—and—"

"And you ran the gantlet and got away safely?"

"That was my business, major."

For a moment Major Bullion's eyes fell to the box and then he sprung up and seized Jupiter Junk's hand.

"You shall never regret this night's work!" cried he, his white face flushing for a moment. "You have paved the way to a cool million and your share shall be what you care to make it."

The hard, stony face of Jupiter Junk did not show any excitement.

He looked into Major Bullion's eyes and said dryly:

"I won't break you up; but I guess I'll have to have a little now."

"Name the amount."

"I'll take five hundred."

"Pshaw! man; I'll make it a thousand!" was the reply.

CHAPTER III.

SOLON SHOOK ENTERS THE GAME.

MR. THOMAS COOVERT, the policeman who with Nelly Nappers had discovered the strange woman dead in the upper room in the Coop, sat down and waited for the coming of the officers.

When he sent in the alarm he said boldly that it looked to him as if a murder had been committed, and he thought it best that a detective should come along.

He did not even hope that his friend, Solon Shook, would be the ferret who would put in an appearance, for that gentleman was out of town on a case which had given him a good deal of trouble and this bothered Covert not a little.

He had a warm side, for Shook had tried to put him onto a number of mysteries such as fell under his observation and the two were fast friends.

Shook was much younger than Covert, but that made no difference, and Mr. Tom, as Nappers called him, was inclined to be-

lieve that he had brought Shook out and made a detective out of him.

This was pardonable pride, and, as such, was so regarded by the force in general, for Coovert was a good-natured, harmless sort of fatherly fellow, and no one would have done anything to hurt his feelings.

Coovert, while he waited, stole a number of sly looks at the dead woman in the chair.

He tried for a time to believe that he had seen her before, but he could not place her and at last gave up in disgust.

No, she was entirely strange to him; he had never seen her before, which he considered quite strange since she had died on his territory, murdered as he had no doubt.

But what had become of the man whom Miss Nappers averred she had seen dead on the floor of that same room?

He could not account for it in any other way than that she was mistaken—that she had found the woman there and that she had been carried to the chair after the discovery.

Coovert was in the midst of his reflections when footsteps were heard on the stairs and he flew to open the door.

A lieutenant of police presented himself at the portal and just beyond him appeared another man at sight of whom the big patrolman uttered a cry of joy.

It was Solon Shook.

"Bless my life! you're just the man I want to see here," exclaimed Coovert, seizing the detective's hand. "I was hoping against hope, for you've been away so long and—"

"Is that the person found dead in this room?" interrupted the officer, striding forward with the smooth-faced detective at his heels.

"That is the one I found when I came here," was the reply with a quick glance at Solon Shook.

"What else have you discovered, Mr. Coovert—any name or anything by which she may be identified?"

"I've been waiting for you, sir. You see I thought you would bring a detective with you, and therefore I concluded to let everything remain as I had found it."

In a little while Solon Shook and the police officer were making a search of the apartment.

"This is a man's room," said the former.

"That's what Nappers said."

"Nappers? Who's Nappers?"

"The girl who told me that there was a dead body in this room."

Coovert had said nothing about the girl's story of the dead man on the floor—he was reserving that for Solon Shook, and the lieutenant turned to the search once more.

"We will remove the body and let the investigation proceed on any lines you may have determined on, Mr. Shook," he said at last and forthwith left the room.

Then it was that Thomas Coovert shut the door and turned with an air of mystery to his friend, the detective.

"You don't know her, Solon?"

"She is strange to me, but we may know more by and by. She has been murdered and by a hand that understands how to kill."

"How's that?"

"Come here and look."

The policeman went forward while Shook held back the dead woman's head and revealed some marks on the throat.

"You don't mean to say that she's been strangled?"

"That's it exactly. She's been held in a vise-like grip—held no doubt till the last spark of life had fled."

"What brought her here? That's what I would like to know, Solon. If what Nappers first saw in this room—that is, if what she said is true—then, what became of the other corpse?"

"The other one, Tom?"

It was time for Nappers's story, and Coovert told it in detail as he had had it from the child.

"You can see the blood-stains on the floor yonder," concluded Coovert. "There's where she says she found the man. He's been living here some months. Nappers is a strange thing, and she knows more about this neighborhood and its people than she lets on. Of course she may be mistaken about the dead man, who after all may have been the woman yonder, but she is sharp-eyed and I can't see how she could make the

blunder, especially after feeling the corpse's face as she says she did."

The detective said nothing but looked at the stains on the floor.

"Do you think it would be hard to find Nappers?" he asked.

"Not very, I guess. If we run across Tommy Flyer we won't be long picking her up."

"She's thick with Tommy, eh? I know him."

"They're close friends, and they share one another's secrets when there are any to share. But Nappers said that she saw no one in the Coop when she entered it except Mother Bluebottle, and she saw her in bed, because her door was ajar and she had to pass it coming to this room."

Solon Shook went over to a bureau and pulled open drawer after drawer.

"You don't know anything about the man who lives here?" he asked, looking over his shoulder at Coovert.

"Nothing beyond what Nappers said."

Solon Shook dived into the last drawer and fished up a lot of dirty linen, which he held up in the light.

As he gave it a shake something fell out and lay on the floor.

"Here's his card anyway," cried Coovert, stopping with an effort and picking up the bit of pasteboard. "It shows that he's a gentleman, at least."

He handed the card to Shook, and saw him bend toward the jet as he attempted to read it.

The card was crumpled and almost as dirty as the linen.

It had been crushed in a hand or crumpled in a pocket—he did not know which—and the name was almost obliterated.

"Can't you make it out, Solon?"

"I see now," and a beam of satisfaction appeared on the detective's countenance. "It's an old card, and he must have thrown it in the drawer some months ago."

"How's that?"

Solon Shook came over to Coovert with the card in his hand, and the policeman bent eagerly forward.

"You see, Tom," said the ferret, "in the first place, the card has been carried a long time in some one's pocket, for it is all crumpled. Next, there is a name on it which has in part been worn out by bad usage; but there remains enough to tell me that the original owner of the card occupied a room in the Belmont Block, which was destroyed by fire six months ago."

"That's a fact. It's an old trail at the start, eh, Solon?"

A slight smile came to the detective's face, and he turned to the card again.

"This card was closely concealed in the dirty linen in the drawer," he went on. "Now, if the man who occupied this room hasn't been to the laundry in six months it's all right; but he must have been a very dirty wretch to let his linen go all that time without so much as a rubbing."

Coovert did not know what to think.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed. "We can find out something about the man in the Coop. Somebody knows him, for in a place like this you'll always find some people who know about other people's business."

Before the detective could stop Policeman Coovert he was in the hall and when he stepped into the corridor he was opening a door which he had passed in coming to the room of mystery.

It was too late to stop the impetuous officer and so Solon Shook went forward and followed his friend into the room.

"What's all the racket in the room near the end of the hall?" exclaimed a voice and the figure of a woman rose in bed and stared at the two men.

She was past sixty and her face had many wrinkles, which was observable despite the grime that darkened it.

"Racket?" repeated Tom Coovert. "It's more serious than you think, madam."

"I hope it's to the undoing of the man who lives in that room," was the reply. "He's been the Jonah of the Coop ever since he became a chick here."

"Oh, you know him, then?"

"I don't and I do, if that suits you."

She was sitting bolt upright in bed and her hand had pushed back her gray hair and arranged the bed-clothes.

"Are you going to take him? No doubt he's guilty enough and the wonder is that you haven't taken him before now."

"What's his name?"

"Won't he tell you?"

Solon Shook here interposed and he said:

"Would you dress and come into the room yourself, madam?"

"Me—Mother Bluebottle?" cried the old woman. "I don't care to see him any more. I never liked him from the first day I met him in the hall and he glared at me like a tiger till I fled for safety back to my nest. What, me get up just to see that man?"

"But it's not the man we want you to look at."

"How's that?" and Mother Bluebottle made an effort to quit her couch at which both Shook and Coovert turned their backs to her.

"Who else is in there if not that man?" and she began to dress as hastily as her bulk would allow.

When she had slipped her monstrous feet into slippers she announced that she was ready to accompany the men to the other room and they started.

"He's not dead, is he?" Mother Bluebottle said, suddenly clutching Coovert's sleeve in the hall.

"Not that we've seen," was the reply.

"Oh, you've got him in bracelets, then? Well, I've been looking for that all along, and now that he's there and is going to quit the Coop, mebbe I'll have a mite of rest."

By this time they had reached the door and Solon Shook held it open.

The following moment Mother Bluebottle shambled across the threshold and had stopped in the middle of the room.

As a matter of course the first thing she saw was the form of the murdered woman lying in the chair and with a cry she reeled away throwing up her hands and hiding her eyes.

The two men looked at one another and exchanged significant glances.

"I thought you had him caged," she said looking at Coovert whom she seemed to know.

"This is the person we found in the room, Mother Bluebottle. Have you ever seen her before?"

"Me? What should I be doing with a friend like that? Me see her before? That's not likely, eh, Policeman Coovert?"

"We didn't know, you see, but we thought it best to let you have a look at her."

The old lady made out to shamble forward and get close enough to make a minute inspection of the pallid face before her.

She shook her head slowly.

"I don't know her. Stay! I think she passed up the stairs the other day. Yes, I'm sure she did now. That's the shawl she wore then. I heard her come down a while after, and at the same time I heard the old diamond-maker talking to her from the head of the flight. You'd better go to him."

"Mother Bluebottle," said Shook to himself, "you're not telling all you know about this woman."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERY-SIFTER BEGINS.

SOLON SHOOK remained in the room until the body of the unidentified woman was removed.

Mother Bluebottle went back to her room, and he heard her lock the door as if there was to be no more intrusion that night, and Thomas Coovert returned to his beat.

The rain had ceased to fall and in some places the skies had cleared and myriads of stars shone upon the city.

The finding and removal of the corpse had been accomplished without greatly disturbing the inmates of the Coop, and upon this the shrewd detective congratulated himself.

It was a mystery which he feared would become deeper as he advanced.

He could not forget the story told by little Miss Nappers.

If she had seen a man on the floor what had become of him?

It was singular, too, that she should vanish during Coovert's absence for she had promised to stay till he came back; but she had simply flitted out of sight leaving no trace behind.

Beyond the crumpled card found among

the dirty linen in the bureau nothing bearing a name had been unearthed in the room and the detective had searched it again and again.

Mother Bluebottle had said that she did not know the man's name or business, but she had remarked in the same breath that she supposed there were people who could enlighten Justice upon that particular subject.

The diamond-maker up stairs!

Solon Shook turned to the last steps as this thought flashed across his mind.

He did not know where to find the old man—Old Oliver, Mother Bluebottle called him—but he went up in search of him.

It was the last floor of the Coop—the one next the sky, as it were, and he found it dark.

Here and there were lights above a transom, but for the most part the place was dark with many shadows and fetid smells.

All at once Solon Shook stopped, for a door near the end of the long corridor opened and a little girl came out.

In the flood of light which fell into the hall as the portal opened the ferret saw that the girl was about seventeen, well formed though poorly clad, and that she was pretty and bright-eyed.

She looked cautiously up and down the hall before she stepped into the corridor, as if afraid that she was being watched.

But the nimble figure of the detective fell at once into a doorway and the girl passed with a pitcher in her hand.

She had closed the door of the room which she had just left, and he could not see into it.

Standing like a statue in the doorway, Shook waited for the girl's return and she came back in a little while.

Again she passed him without catching sight of his motionless figure and the door opened and shut upon her.

Was she the companion of the diamond-maker?

Solon Shook went forward and stopped at the door.

"So you're back, Coral?" said a man's voice.

"Yes, sir, and I didn't hear or see a thing."

"That's queer. There was a racket on the lower floor and we saw the patrol-wagon in the street."

"That we did, but all's still out there now."

"Was there a light in Mother Bluebottle's room?"

"A very dim one."

"And in the other room?"

"It was quite dark."

Half a minute's silence followed the last answer, and Solon Shook waited awhile longer.

He was positive that the girl had not locked the door, for he had listened for the turn of a key with the keenest of ears, and at last he laid his hand on the knob.

For one brief moment he hesitated and then he opened the portal, at the same time stepping forward into the light of the room beyond the threshold.

There were two exclamations of astonishment, one from an old man seated at a table upon which were some retorts and scientific apparatus and the other by the little girl whom he had seen with the pitcher.

These two people were undoubtedly the occupants of the chamber, and the girl ran to the gray-beard and cuddled close in his arms.

Then the detective saw that she was in reality a little woman—that she had womanish ways and looked more like a lady than a mere child in short dresses.

More than this: there was a certain resemblance between the two despite the difference in years, and this was all the more noticeable when the man held his face close to his charge's as if to assure her that she would be protected.

"I beg your pardon," said Solon Shook. "It is not my intention to harm you. I dropped in to make an inquiry or two, nothing more."

"At this hour, sir?" rather haughtily said the old man, looking at a strange clock whose dial was red with white numerals to which a skeleton hand pointed.

"I am one of those people who know no hours when it comes to business," returned Shook.

"I see, a detective!"

At this the girl seemed to straighten up for she fell back and looked defiantly at the man of trails.

"Tell him nothing, father, if that is his occupation!" she exclaimed.

"Hush, Coral. I will answer the gentleman as I see fit," and he looked at Solon Shook again.

"You can go on now."

"You may have heard something of what has just passed in this house," began the detective.

"We hear but little here, but your presence in this room tells me that something has taken place in the Coop."

"You are right. Murder has been done."

"What's that? Murder? In the Coop and to-night?"

Coral broke away and ran over to a chair where she sat down and studied Solon Shook's face with an intensity that claimed the detective's attention.

"Admitting that the darkest of crimes has been committed here, in what manner can we be connected with it?" asked the man turning again to Shook.

"I do not say that you are in any way connected with it. Don't misunderstand me. The dead woman is unidentified—"

"The dead woman?"

"Yes, sir—"

"Oh, I thought a man had been killed."

It seemed to Solon that the diamond-maker regretted his words the moment they passed his lips, but they could not be recalled.

"What led you to believe that the victim was a man?" asked Solon.

"Men are the victims of murder mostly, you know."

"That is true."

"Who would kill a woman?"

"There are creatures who would do anything."

"Granted," said the diamond-maker.

"There are people who will do anything. You are right there. But what was the woman doing in that room?"

"In what room?"

"I beg your pardon," and the old man seemed to start while he flushed. "I heard some noises—voices, you see, on the next floor, and a light which seemed to come from a certain room told me, or appeared to, at any rate—that the crime took place in the last room along the corridor."

"You are right; it took place there, or, at least, there's where the body was found."

For a moment the diamond-maker paused and his gaze wandered to the girl in the chair, at which he glanced at Solon Shook with a smile.

"She falls asleep without an effort," he observed, for Coral seemed fast asleep. "I never saw a child like her."

"She is your daughter, eh?"

"She is my daughter," was the quick and somewhat emphatic retort. "Coral is not as strong as she looks. The room is close, and she can't get all the air she needs. It's really a coop up here, next the sky, you know. Wait, I'll carry her to bed."

The old man came round the table and tenderly lifted the girl from the chair, with a look over her flowing ringlets at the detective.

In another moment he had vanished beyond curtains, which he parted with his hand, and Solon had time to take in the appointments of the room.

It was in every way a laboratory.

Everywhere there were scientific instruments, bottles securely tied, retorts, crucibles, a little furnace to the left of the table, a book-case with a few books on the shelves on one side of the room, and many other things which are to be found only in the den of an alchemist.

By the time the detective had completed his survey of the apartment the curtains parted again and the tall figure of the gray-beard came back.

He waved Solon to a seat near the table, and went back to his accustomed one.

He looked like a man of past sixty, for his beard was almost white, and his figure was a little stooped, but his eyes were as bright as those of the girl's, and his voice still strong and clear.

For a second he looked across the table, seeming to make a study of the man who had

entered his presence uninvited; but all at once he said:

"I cannot think that you found a woman dead down-stairs. It seems so very strange when the room was occupied by a man."

"Strange things always occur in crime," replied Solon. "The woman may have visited you."

"What's that? Are you going to drag me into this affair? Beware! you mustn't go too far, sir."

Solon smiled.

"It is my intention to go to the bottom of this matter," he retorted. "The woman, as I have said, may have visited you. She was in the Coop yesterday and came up these stairs. You remember the dark red shawl?"

It seemed to the detective that the man behind the table would fall from his chair.

His hands suddenly clutched the arms of the chair, and the long dark fingers appeared to sink into the wood while with a tremendous effort he remained calm.

"The red shawl, you say?"

"Yes, sir; she saw you yesterday, or at least she came up here for that purpose."

The old man was calm again; he leaned forward and his hand, to show that he had all his nerves under control, picked up a knife and balanced it on the tips of his fingers.

"You have acknowledged that you are a detective," said he, narrowly watching Solon Shook. "I can't say that I have anything against men of your class for I haven't done anything that would lay me liable to arrest. But I don't like the thought of being mixed up in anything mysterious, especially for Coral's sake," he glanced toward the curtains. "We live here at peace with the world and they say that I try to make diamonds."

"I don't care what they say when they don't go any further than that; but you see to be drawn into a crime—to have the girl dragged before the public—perhaps made a witness before a court of law—that is too bad."

"But if you could bring the guilty to justice with a word—if you had it in your power—"

The old man suddenly raised his hand and broke Solon's sentence.

"Under the present circumstances I wouldn't if I could!" he exclaimed. "I am going to keep out of this muddle. With all your cunning you are not going to drag us into this murder mystery of the Coop. I won't have it. You will have your trouble for your pains. I know no red shawl in this matter; I was not seen by any woman yesterday; I don't know who lived in the room at the end of the hall. You can't get anything out of Oliver Onyx and his daughter."

Solon Shook knew that was all.

The lips of the old alchemist shut like the shells of an oyster and that ended the interview.

CHAPTER V.

AN EARLY MORNING INTERVIEW.

SOLON SHOOK looked at the old man and saw the determined countenance he wore.

He knew that it would be useless to try to pump him further and he forbore.

What Oliver Onyx knew of the man on the floor below, if anything, was one of the secrets of his bosom and the detective concluded to let him alone for the present.

Bidding him good-night, he went out and descended to the hall on the lower floor.

It was quite dark and the only light he saw was in the room occupied by Mother Bluebottle.

No sound came from the old lady's room, and the sleek ferret, at the beginning of a new mystery, did not disturb her.

"Some other time, my friends," he muttered to himself. "We will come together in the future," and down another flight of steps he went and emerged from the Coop.

Thomas Covert had gone back to his beat and the detective found him meditating in the doorway where Nappers had found him.

"It's rather queer, eh, Solon?" said the policeman as the shadower came up. "What puzzles me most is Nappers's story—the dead man on the floor, you know. But I found a woman in the chair as dead as the man was; but what became of him and who

was he? Find anything out up in the Coop?"

Solon Shook said frankly that as yet he had come across no tangible clue, and that while he was not disheartened things looked very opaque.

"Seems so to me," said Coovert. "What was the woman killed for and who did it? She must have gone to that room for a purpose and there ran across her fate. I've heard of such things before, but never just that way. We got very little out of Mother Bluebottle, didn't we? She's a queer one, keeps her room nearly all the time, so big and ponderous, you know; a good hit for a dime museum," and the portly policeman laughed.

"Where can I run across Nappers, did you say, Tom?"

"That's just what I don't know, and since the child ran off and left the dead woman to herself I wouldn't know where to look for her. You say you know Tommy Flyer?"

"The boy with a man's head on his shoulders?—I know Tommy."

"They're as thick as two kittens—Tommy and Nappers," answered Coovert. "Where you found one you might run across the other. Tommy nests in the Tangle—second floor, third door to the right. At least he has been there for some time."

The Tangle was a tenement-house like the Coop, but more intricate, and Solon nodded. He knew where it was and while Coovert spoke he recalled a visit to the place some months before.

He bade Coovert good morning and went off.

Day broke over the city with but few people as yet the possessors of knowledge of the strange mystery of the past night.

It had happened at a time which kept most of the morning newspapers from getting hold of it, but it was likely that some late reporter would be able to catch it and secure a modest "scoop."

It turned out thus.

When Solon sat down to an early breakfast in the little restaurant which he patronized he picked up a damp sheet and caught almost at once the head-lines that prefaced the murder in the Coop.

He noticed that the account said nothing about Nappers's find, that it detailed the finding of the woman dead in the chair, and claimed that she had been artistically strangled which gave rise to the speculation, by the imaginative reporter, of course, that a band of thugs was operating in the city.

Shook laid the paper down and proceeded with his breakfast.

An hour later he was climbing a shaky staircase in the Tangle and at last he knocked at a door which bore in straggling handiwork the name of, "T. Flyer."

He had to knock a full minute before he heard any one stir in the room and then the door was opened by a singular looking creature.

Tommy Flyer was twenty if a day.

He had the body of a boy of fourteen, but his face was old and full of cunning and over his cheeks looked a pair of dark little eyes.

Tommy Flyer pointed to a chair with a broken cane bottom and Solon took it with a smile.

The occupant of the room went back and sat down on the edge of his tumbled cot.

The detective was quite sure from Tommy's look of innocence that he had not heard of the murder and he went on that hypothesis.

"I am looking for a friend of yours, Tommy," said he. "I am anxious to find Miss Nelly Nappers."

At this the little eyes opened wider, and their owner replied with a smile as he crossed his hands:

"She doesn't board with me, you know."

"Of course not; but just now she seems to have vanished—changed her boarding-place, as it were—and I would like to ask her a few questions."

"Nappers might not care to hear your questions, for she would at once suspect that you're a shadow."

"But Nappers wouldn't hesitate to assist the cause of justice?"

"I don't mean that, sir, but you see Nappers don't want to be dragged into court on any sort of scheme, and if she has come into possession of any secret of worth to you men,

why, she might keep a still tongue in her head just to prevent figuring in a sensation."

"But where would I be likely to find Nappers, Tommy?"

The boy didn't know.

Indeed, he sometimes did not see Miss Nappers for a week at a stretch and then he was liable to run across her most any time.

This did not satisfy the detective.

He leaned toward Mr. Flyer and said as he covered him with a finger:

"The quickest way to get rid of a bad thing is to throw it overboard at once, Tommy," said he. "We want Miss Nappers and if I have to hunt her up against your will and hers, why, she will have to figure conspicuously in this new case and get some notoriety which may not be very pleasant."

Immediately Tommy's mien changed.

He seemed to recoil and lose color.

His leg which he had been holding up with locked hands dropped to the floor and he looked straight at the detective for a moment.

"You won't give Nappers any unnecessary trouble if she is produced in a few moments, will you?" he asked anxiously.

"I will not; but I must see her."

Tommy sprung up and crossed the room to a closet that occupied one side of it and opened the door.

As he did so Solon Shook caught the flash of a garment and the next moment Nelly Nappers, blushing, but at the same time looking indignant, stepped into the room.

"You see she dropped in a few moments ahead of you and when we heard you out there we thought she might be wanted, and so she went into retirement for a time."

This was Tommy's explanation while Nappers stood like a statue waiting for the detective to begin the inquisition.

"I guess, Nelly, you would better tell this man all he wants to know so far as you know it," continued Tommy. "He is a detective and might give us a little trouble if we tried to keep back what we know, which isn't very much."

The last was addressed to Shook and Nelly Nappers came forward and rested her hand on the table.

"What do you want to know?" she asked.

"You might guess," replied Solon. "Tell me all about your visit to the room at the end of the hall in the Coop and of the man you found lying on the floor."

The girl threw a quick glance toward Tommy Flyer who nodded and she turned to Solon Shook again.

"I know what Mr. Tom Coovert, the cop, thinks," she began with a little laugh. "He don't think that I saw a man dead on the floor because there was none there when I went back with him, though we found a corpse in that room."

Thereupon she proceeded and detailed her visit to the room, her finding of the man on the boards, her touching his face to make sure that he was dead, her going down and finding the policeman sheltered from the rain, and their return to the room.

It was evident all through that Nappers was telling the truth, and Solon Shook believed that she was certain she had seen a man dead on the floor.

"You knew the man in that room, did you, Miss Nappers?" asked Solon.

"Not as one knows some people. I had seen him."

"You went to see him that night, did you?"

Nelly hesitated, and another look passed between her and Tommy Flyer.

"Nappers doesn't care to go into some details," said the boy, coming forward.

"She had a good reason for going to the room when she did; but she didn't expect to find him dead, sir."

"That's all right, Tommy. Miss Nappers will answer or keep mum just as she pleases, but keeping mum just now may give her trouble in the future."

The girl took a long breath, and seemed to reflect a moment.

"I was taking a note to him," she said at last.

"A note to the man in the end room?"

"Yes, sir."

"From whom?"

"From a woman whom you may know—Jericho Jen."

Solon nodded.

"But finding him dead, as you say, you did not deliver the note?"

"I did not."

"But took it back to the sender, and informed her of the situation?"

"I took it back, but did not get to deliver it."

"No?"

"Jericho Jen wasn't at home to receive it."

"Then you were not to take back an answer from the man?"

"I was not. My instructions were to deliver the note and come away."

"Did you leave the note at Jennie's room?"

Another swift glance at Tommy Flyer, but this time that individual did not respond.

"If you did not deliver the note, what did you do with it, Miss Nelly?"

"I—I kept it."

"And you have it now?"

"I have it now, and I want to get rid of the accursed thing!"

"Let me have it, then."

The detective held out his hand, and the girl drew from her bosom a small envelope, which was crumpled and very much soiled.

Solon Shook put the note in his pocket without opening it and looked again at Miss Nappers.

"It need not be known that you sought to deliver Jericho Jen's note last night," he remarked. "Since you do not care to be dragged into this matter, I will do what I can to accommodate you. The woman found in the chair was murdered, but the man discovered on the floor by yourself is missing."

"What does that mean?" put in Tommy Flyer. "Don't you think the secret is kept by some one in the Coop? Nappers, tell the gentleman what you saw while you were getting out of the house between the time Policeman Tom left you and when he came back to find you gone?"

The girl turned again to the detective and resumed:

"I was about to go down the stairs, for I didn't care to be in the room when Mr. Tom came back with the police sergeant and the detectives. The hall was dark, but all at once I was brushed by a man who passed me. I heard him open the door of the room where we found the dead woman and in the light I saw his face."

"For a moment of course, Nelly?"

"For a second, as it were. It was a face covered with a whitish beard, and when the door closed behind him I thought I had seen the old diamond-maker who with his daughter lives next the roof in the Coop."

"He entered that room, did he?"

"Yes, sir. Of course, it may not have been Oliver Onyx, but it looked like him."

"I didn't want Nappers to omit that, for it may be a clue, you see," smiled Tommy Flyer, feeling that he had furthered the cause of justice. "Since Nappers has talked I want you to know everything, Mr. Shook."

"That's right, Tommy. Miss Nappers has done very well, and I am sure she will never regret it."

"Not unless I am served the way the woman was," added Nelly with a wink at Tommy.

In a little while Solon Shook stood on the sidewalk and his first impulse was to find a spot in which to read the sealed note which Nappers had failed to deliver the night before.

It was a brief note, traced in a straggling, though effeminate hand and ran as follows:

"Be on your guard. They are going to get the prize at all hazards and your life isn't worth the flicker of a candle. You might let me keep it and it would be safe. If you retain it you will lose it and life. Remember! You are in the shadow now."

"JEN."

CHAPTER VI.

JUPITER JUNK INVESTIGATES.

JUPITER JUNK, the man who had secured the thousand dollars from Major Bullion when he had asked for but one-half that sum, sat in a little room to which he had carried a newspaper fresh from the press.

The sheets were still damp, and he had bought it on the street, and had carried it to the place for the purpose of looking over it at his leisure and where he would not be molested.

The room looked like the man's lodging place, as indeed it was.

It was in the second story back in a well-to-do house not in a overly respectable quarter of the city, and not far from the docks.

Its one window looked out upon a sloping roof which in turn overlooked a cramped back-yard and a pair of dirty children were playing in the dirt there.

Jupiter went to this window and took his seat.

The paper he unfolded and began to run his eye up and down the columns.

"Jehul!" he suddenly exclaimed, as his searching eye stopped and became fixed. "What's all this? In the name of Cæsar's wife, where did they get that fake?"

The man was more than astonished as his countenance revealed; he was thunder-struck.

During the next ten seconds he read the head-lines which referred to the mystery of the Coop.

"TOUGH MYSTERY IN A TOUGH QUARTER."

A STRANGE WOMAN FOUND STRANGLED IN THE COOP.

Unidentified and No Clue.

SOMETHING FOR OUR JAVERTS TO LOOK AFTER."

It was these head-lines that startled Mr. Jupiter Junk, and when he had read them he began to read what followed.

The longer he read the more startled he became, if his face is to be taken for an index of his feelings.

He seemed glued to the chair he occupied and never took the slightest notice of the brats yelling and fighting over a broken marble in the yard below.

"It beats my time all to pieces," he exclaimed as he looked up. "A dead woman in that room! Tell me what will happen next, will you? What became of the man? but this account says nothing of a man at all, though the newspaper states that it was a man's room; but there she was, dead in the chair, found by Policeman Coovert, the big copper who has that particular beat."

He went back and read the account again. It did not seem possible from his standpoint.

"I'm stumped," he ejaculated. "Never saw anything like this. I'm completely mystified with the reporters. Ay, there is something for the Gotham Javerts as the *Times* calls them."

Jupiter Junk became calm at last and took a cigar from his pocket and smoked thoughtfully.

"A dead woman in the chair! Strangled, eh? Deliberately killed and no clue as to her identity! Let me see. Shall I tell the major, or perhaps he's seen it. He may have run across the sensation before I got a peep at it, and Mr. Spiders—Hang that perfumed viper! I'm itching to show him what hands are made for," and he looked like a crossed tiger as the words dropped from his tongue.

By and by Jupiter laid the paper aside and threw his half-smoked cigar into the cuspidor.

Then he crossed the room and vanished behind a curtain that hung there.

When he came into view again he had slightly changed his apparel, and added a mite more of whiskers to his face, and wore a different hat from the one which lay on the table.

"I'm a bit anxious to take a peep at the premises myself," said he half aloud to himself. "There's no harm going down to the Coop, and coming back I'll drop in upon the major and see if he has heard anything."

He went out, locking the door carefully behind him, and was soon upon the street.

Jupiter Junk was an agile man, and consequently a rapid walker, so that he did not have to take a car. Starting off at a brisk pace he soon turned into the street in which

the Coop stood, and in another minute was at the old bee-hive itself.

He found that the whole neighborhood had heard of the murder, for a little crowd of people blockaded the sidewalk near the door, and beyond the threshold a large florid woman was explaining to a group of breathless persons how the police had found the dead woman in the room, and how they had taken the body to the Morgue.

The appearance of Junk did not create any sensation, and he pushed into the house as if he was "regular" there.

"They've locked the door, sir," said this Amazon. "They won't let any one see the inside of the room where they found 'er, and you can't get so much as a peep over the transom, for they've covered it with paper on the inside."

Jupiter stopped and looked down the hallway.

"Is it true that they don't know who she was?" he queried.

"As true as gospel. I live in the house myself, and I vow I never see'd her here myself. Where she came from, what she was doin' here, and who killed her—sayin' that she was really killed—is past my knowledge."

"Did you see her after death?"

"Got jes' a squint as they carried the body past my door, for I opened it, you know, and took a look."

"What was she like? Was she young?"

"I wouldn't call her old. She had a sharp, good-lookin' face, as faces go now. When I first see'd her I thought of a woman who came here some time ago and tried to find some one in the house; but a second look convinced me that it wasn't that one."

"Who carried her down-stairs?"

"The big cop on the beat and two others. They didn't think to cover her face, and that's how I got my look."

Junk walked toward the door and tried the knob.

"I told you they had locked it," called the woman. "They don't intend to have anything in there disturbed, so that the detectives won't be handicapped; that's what they tell me. If you want to see the woman you will find her at the Morgue."

"What time o' night was it?" asked Jupiter.

"A little after twelve. It was a very quiet night in the Coop—more than usually so, and I lay awake till twelve. Just afore the clock struck I heard some one come up stairs, and the footsteps went toward the end o' the hall where the room is, you see. They was a man's steps, an' he walked as if he didn't want any one to know he was comin' in. Presently, however, they came back an' went down-stairs again, an' I dropped into a doze."

"You didn't hear the woman come, then?"

"No. I didn't know she was in there till I heard noises which was made by the big cop and the others. Never dreamt that some one was being strangled within a few feet o' my chamber. But they say there was."

Jupiter came back from the door and looked up-stairs.

"We've lost a chick—two o' 'em," continued the woman, following his gaze.

"What do you mean?"

"It was almost too funny for anything. If you've ever been here—in the Coop, I mean—you have seen or heard of the diamond-maker."

"Who's he?"

"Old Oliver—Oliver Onyx and the little girl he calls his daughter, though I always took his statement with a little salt. The pair have been livin' in the upper part of the Coop, next the sky, as we say. They was there last night at six, for I saw the girl come down to the next floor for a pitcher o' water. But the birds are gone now. They went off just about daylight—Old Oliver and Coral, as he called the young 'un."

"Moved away, eh?"

"Looks that way. At least they made several trips up and down stairs, and the last one the old man and the child came down with odd-looking packages, well wrapped, which they carried carefully; and that was the last o' 'em."

"A sort of sudden flight, don't you think?"

"Very sudden," was the reply. "I never

thought we was goin' to lose the pair so soon—thought they was the most established chicks in the Coop. Well, mebbe they got tired o' their neighbors, and perhaps the affair of last night hastened their departure. There's no tellin', you know."

"I have heard of the couple," remarked Jupiter, casting another glance up-stairs. "He was an old man with a white beard, and the girl was pretty, about seventeen and real sprightly."

"She was a bird, and the young fellow who came now and then to see her was as gay-looking as she, and they seemed devoted."

"Oh, she had a lover, then?"

"That was natural, you see. She needed one, as she was compelled to keep Old Oliver's company all the time—to live among his strange-looking apparatus and to inhale the disgustin' odors that sometimes drifted out o' the room. They may call that diamond-makin', but my private opinion always was that he never made many that was real."

"All this is a curious story," said Jupiter. "First a murder and then a flight."

"It's very odd, but it's true. You can go up and see the empty nest."

"I believe I will."

"If you don't know where the room was I'll show you."

"I think I can find it."

"It's the second door to the right, at the top o' the last flight. You can't miss it, but there's nothing to see but the empty nest."

Jupiter Junk hurried away and soon reached the door.

It was not locked, so there was nothing to bar his admission, and in another moment he stood inside.

Everything indicated a hasty flight by the room's last inmates.

Here and there were small but well-used crucibles, and a little anvil stood on the table; but beyond this, emptiness.

Scattered over the floor, and lying at the mouth of the grate were bits of charred papers—letters which had been burned previous to flight—and open stood a cupboard door, with nothing on the shelves but dust and emptiness.

"It beats me again," exclaimed Jupiter, halting in the middle of the room and staring about him. "Here's another mystery as deep as the one down-stairs. Oliver and the young pigeon vanish between darkness and dawn, and soon after the finding of the woman in his room. Here's something for the major, sure enough. What's the use of tryin' to find a clue to their whereabouts here? We'll discover them by and by, for they can't hide from us always. I've found out something by comin' to the old Coop. I can go back to the major now."

He withdrew, passing from the house unmolested, and vanishing around the first corner.

Twenty minutes later he appeared rather suddenly to a man seated in a sumptuously furnished room with a newspaper in his hand.

"Just the man I want to see!" exclaimed Major Bullion as Jupiter made his appearance. "Look at this if you will, or perhaps you already know."

A smile for a moment chased some of the sullen darkness from Junk's face.

"I know what you refer to," he answered.

"You've read the account, I see. Well, it's true—there was a woman found dead in the man's room last night and she's now at the Morgue."

"Why, man, you told me last night that you had a tussle for the box."

"So I did and so I had—a smart tussle which all the more surprises me this morning. But that's not all that happened last night."

"Not all?"

"No; there's a little more mystery and some that the police haven't struck yet."

"Go on."

"Well, the sky birds lit out. Oliver Onyx and his little dove have left the nest, deserted it, taking with them their earthly possessions, or at least those by which the couple live."

"Gone? Old Oliver and the bird? Look here, Junk; you don't want any grass to

grow under your feet till you've found them."

Jupiter grinned, but at the same time he bowed profoundly.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HAWK FINDS THE NEW NEST.

"You must go at once after them."

Jupiter Junk felt that this was a command which he dared not disobey.

The man who uttered it put a good deal of importance into his tone which emphasized the mandate, and Junk leaned back in his chair though he picked up his hat.

"They may have fled the city, but that is not likely," continued Major Bullion. "You will find them, no matter how much time it takes, or what amount of money it costs. You will need something for expenses, but they must be unearthed, and you will do well to set out immediately."

The major drew his wallet and counted out some bills without the shadow of a remonstrance from the dark-faced man who looked on.

Jupiter raked in the money and transferred it to his pocket without recounting, after which he rose to depart.

"It's the dead woman that mystifies me," said he, looking down upon the man in the chair.

"It's enough to mystify any one. You're sure, of course, that she wasn't there when you left?"

"Sure?" a smile came to the speaker's lips and remained there a second. "I guess I know a man from a woman. We were there alone; but here Tom Coovert, as they call him, found her in the place dead and not a sign of the man was to be seen."

Major Bullion seemed to reflect a moment and then he said:

"It will be cleared up some time, but the mystery just now is, what's become of the birds? The vanishment of the man you will clear up after you have found them."

Jupiter took it that the interview was at an end, and a minute later he stood outside the house looking down the street.

He had a commission which interested him a great deal.

He wanted to know what had become of Oliver Onyx and his daughter Coral, and was eager to take the trail.

He could not believe that the chase would occupy much time, for he argued that it was next to impossible for a couple like them to quit the house, so prominent as was the Coop, and, with a lot of laboratory furniture, escape him entirely.

They had simply gone to another part of the city, perchance over into Jersey; but at any rate they could not be far away.

He went to the trail at once.

Going back to the Coop he instituted inquiries which threw some light upon the subject of the sudden flight, and when he came away was sure he had struck the trail.

"When they get away from Junk they may consider themselves lucky," he muttered. "I will take up the clue I got in the old trap, and if I don't make anything out of it I will go to the theory that I have hatched out as being a good one."

The "clue" which Jupiter Junk thought he had obtained in the Coop turned out to be a bad one, and he was forced to give it up in the afternoon.

He found the shadows of night deepening around him when he turned back to his lodgings for a little rest.

He was tired, but not disheartened.

The window that looked out upon the little back-yard found him at the sill with his gaze turned downward to the cramped space where the two children, to be seen at all times, were playing in the dirt.

"Why not take up the old idea?" suddenly exclaimed Jupiter. "I remember once finding at the old man's door a card which ought to do some good now. I have it yet."

He opened a bureau drawer and fished from its depths a little card which he read in the dusk.

It bore the address of:

"MRS. SARAH CUMMINGS,
FURNISHED ROOMS,
No. — Pell Street,
CITY."

"It's not a very nice part of town," mused Jupiter, "but maybe it's good enough for the birds. I think I know something about Sarah Cummings. It can't be our Sarah—the woman we used to have dealings with, but I'll see."

He went away at once and with the card in his pocket.

It did not take the eager man long to reach the part of the city where the furnished rooms were, and the moment the door was opened in response to his ring he fell back a pace and gazed at the little woman who stood before him.

It was the same Sarah Cummings, but it was evident that she did not know him.

"Do you still keep furnished rooms?" asked Junk.

"I do when I have them to keep," was the response. "But my last ones were taken this morning, and I'm sorry I can't give you a favorable answer."

Jupiter tried to look disappointed.

"I will have a lodger going away in a few days," continued Mrs. Cummings, "and then, if you are still on the lookout, I can satisfy you."

"I may have a room by that time. But never mind about it. I have two friends who are as anxious to get rooms as I am and I thought I might do them a favor by finding a place for them."

"I took in two roomers this morning," was the reply which showed that Sarah Cummings suspected nothing.

"An old man and a girl?"

"Your friends, I suppose! Well, they are nicely situated up stairs."

"I'm glad of that and I feel like going up and congratulating them."

"You can do so if you wish. You will find them in the last room on the last floor—the only one I could let them have at present; but the old gentleman said it suited him very well for all purposes. He's an alchemist, I believe—at least I would judge so from the queer-looking things he brought along."

Jupiter Junk could hardly conceal his delight as he pushed past the woman and began to ascend the stairs.

His hunt had ended in success at last; he had unearthed Oliver Onyx and Coral, thus carrying out the commands issued by the major, and in a short time he was standing at a door listening to voices beyond the threshold.

When he rapped the sounds ceased and he heard some one approach the door.

The moment it was opened Jupiter Junk sprang into the room to hear a sharp cry and to see an old man go back to a chair behind a table and throw his arms protectingly about a young girl's waist.

He had found Old Oliver and Coral!

The appearance of the dark-faced man in the room sent a thrill of alarm and fear through the girl's nerves and she looked at him with a pale face and eyes full of terror.

It was easy to be seen that the skill of Oliver Onyx had turned the new home into a laboratory, for the alchemist's helps were naturally arranged and everything was in readiness for his art.

As Jupiter stopped near the table he cast his eyes upward and took note of an open cupboard in which stood a full length skeleton the bones of which were as white as snow.

For a minute after his entrance silence reigned in the apartment and then Onyx said:

"You have found us. Now what do you want?"

His voice was haughty in tone and somewhat cold.

"That depends," answered Jupiter, glancing at the girl whose frightened looks seemed to increase her ripe beauty. "That depends I say, and a good deal of it hinges upon your conduct."

He stood at the edge of the table, looking a good deal like a wild beast that had invaded the sheepfold, and for half a second he glared at the couple separated from him by few boards.

"I have been looking for you—that's right," he said, speaking with the half suppressed glee of a fiend. "You made a good flight last night, or rather this morning, for when the sun came up the nest was empty."

"We left the old place. We had engaged this one some time ago and we intended coming here some time."

"But so soon?" grinned Jupiter. "Would you have quitted the Coop this morning if the affair of last night had not taken place?"

"Don't answer the man, father," cried Coral, clinging closer to the alchemist's form. "He is not here for any good and I don't like his face."

"You don't, eh, my bird? Take care! you may have to form a better opinion of it before many days. I can't say that I'm overly handsome; but I know what I'm about all the same, so don't get frightened at my face so soon."

"I refuse to answer you," said Onyx, suddenly. "You refer, of course, to the mysterious affair of the Coop last night. I could not be there and know nothing of it; that were impossible."

"Of course, of course," smiled Jupiter. "You concluded to make hay while the sun shone, and thus I find you here and not in the old quarters. By the way, Oliver, what became of the little long box which you had filled with diamonds?"

Coral uttered a scream and suddenly pulled loose from the alchemist and bounded across the room.

The eye of Jupiter Junk followed her and saw her vanish into another apartment.

"I don't want the box," continued Jupiter. "I only want to recall it to your mind. You remember it, of course. That's all. The girl don't like me, I see."

"She never will."

"Not well enough to marry me, eh?"

This was followed by a slight scream, which came from the other room, and Jupiter threw a quick glance toward the door, as if he expected to see it open and Coral enter the room again.

"You don't mean to press your suit at this time? Do anything but this and—"

"I haven't pressed it, have I?" was the interruption, and Jupiter leaned forward and looked squarely into the old man's face. "You understand the situation. You can't escape us: there's no use trying, Oliver. You are in the toils now just as much as ever and the old promise holds good, and perhaps will so hold until it has been carried out to the letter."

There was no reply, the old alchemist settling back in his chair and looking toward the door of the room which had closed upon his daughter's figure.

"How goes diamond-making anyhow? You have the secret which the world has been craving for centuries, and you are able to carry out your wildest designs. The little chick has grown up beautiful, and I am in a position to make you feel safe. You know that Jupiter Junk has it in his hands to unmake you and to hurl you from your present position down—down into the abyss of destruction; yet you refuse to carry out the old promise."

At this juncture the door flew open, and there bounded into the room the slight figure of the alchemist's daughter, who ran at once to him to be folded to his bosom.

Jupiter Junk uttered an exclamation of rough delight.

"She's as pretty as a picture!" he exclaimed. "And what's more—"

He was not allowed to complete the sentence, for the door opened once more and a youth, barely twenty, smooth-faced and keenly handsome, stood before the astonished Junk.

The man-hunter turned and looked at the pair behind the table, but as neither spoke he faced the motionless youth, and in his eagerness leaned forward, his hand resting on the table and his eyes filled with wonder.

Something told Jupiter Junk that the young man was Coral's lover.

He bit his lips almost through at the thought, and the next moment a contemptuous grin overspread his face.

"Who is he, Oliver?" he asked, with a glance at the old alchemist.

"Let me answer that," came from the young man's lips. "I am Roger Rex, and I have as good a right in this room as you have, Mr. Junk. Your mission hither does not seem to be of the best, and I shall protect my friends, so far as I can, against the machinations of such as you!"

CHAPTER VIII.

SOLON SHOOK'S NEW TRAIL.

It was on Jupiter Junk's tongue to say: "Who are you?" but he did not.

The determined mien of the young man who so coolly confronted him, coupled with his youth, stumped the dark-faced man, and he drew back and looked silently at Roger Rex.

He had been in the other room all the time and Coral had gone to him with the story of his (Junk's) coming to the new nest.

Perhaps the girl's importunities had failed to keep him from the laboratory, for when he made his appearance a light cry had fallen from Coral's lips.

"So," said Jupiter at last, "so you defy me and seem to like to pick a quarrel with your superior."

"I want no quarrel, sir, but I am here to defend my friends against those whom I deem their enemies."

"That's it, eh? Well, Mr. What's-your-name, you may have your hands full, especially if I take a notion to be troublesome."

This was spoken with a good deal of emphasis and the alchemist's daughter suddenly broke from her father's embraces and threw herself between the two men.

"Roger seeks no quarrel with you!" she cried, turning to Junk. "He is my friend and he shall precipitate no scene in this room while I am here."

"Oh, I see," snarled Junk. "Your friend, is he? So you keep your friends concealed in this house, do you?"

"He was here when you happened to call," answered Coral, flushing. "And I thought it best for him to withdraw."

"Just so. I see that his temper couldn't keep him penned up and he thought best to appear on the scene and show me his teeth."

"I am here at any rate," put in Roger Rex, answering for himself. "I thought it best to come out and face whatever was here. You are Jupiter Junk, I believe."

"I am that person and am afraid of no boys."

Coral sprang to Roger's side and clutching his arm looked at the fiend near the table.

"If you please, gentlemen, let us have no trouble here," and Old Oliver rose and stretched his hands across the table. "I am getting old and my days are near their ending. Besides this, I am not long for this game of sin and deception, and you will let me pass the remaining hours of my life in quiet."

"Not for the world would I interfere with that quietude," said the youth. "I cannot answer for that man there."

Jupiter Junk scowled and looked at the diamond-maker.

"You know what you have promised," he said, in an undertone, but it was heard by all in the room. "Much depends upon your future action. As for that boy yonder, let him beware of the man who can destroy all of you in an instant."

"That is a threat which none but a brute would utter!" exclaimed young Rex, striding forward with clinched hands. "It is the language of a scamp and I shall resent it to the extent of my powers."

"Not here, young man. You will run across Jupiter Junk soon enough without seeking a collision here. I'll see you later, and you, Oliver, and you, my pretty birdling. Don't for a moment think you can hide from the eye that sleeps not, nor from the hand that always finds. Good-night!"

He strode to the door and opened it with a dark look at Roger Rex who might have barred his passage if Coral had not interposed her body.

"Let him go!" she cried. "That man is a mischief-maker and a scoundrel of the first water. Let him go, Roger. Don't seek a collision with him."

As for Oliver Onyx, his head had fallen forward on the table and the young people with a glance at him exchanged looks full of alarm.

By-and-by Coral went around the table and lifted her father's head to discover that his face was white and his eyes expressionless.

"He has been unmanned by that fiend,"

said Coral, looking up at her lover. "His coming completely frustrated him, and though quite strong despite his age, this confrontation has unstrung his nerves."

It took some time for the young couple to bring the old alchemist back to life and even then he appeared about to go into another swoon.

"Who and what is that man?" asked Roger.

"Don't ask me," was the quick answer, and the old man caught Coral's wrists and drew her toward him.

"Child, we are still in the shadow and nothing seems able to break the infernal spell. I thought we were safe here, but he tracked us down—heaven knows how, and he will go back and report to his superior."

"To whom will he report? Has that wretch a superior whom he serves when he runs you down? Come, Oliver, if you don't care to share this man's secret with me, I shall not press you to; but I must retain the right to defend Coral against all such advances as his, and against those of the person in whose employ you intimated Jupiter Junk is."

"That's right, but you can't save us," was the wailing cry. "You have youth, strength and nerve, but they will prove inadequate. You have told him nothing, Coral?"

"Nothing, father."

"That is right, child. Better let him go through the world, hating you for your silence, than to know the truth."

Roger Rex who heard these words, though they were not spoken for his ears, did not know what to think, but it occurred to him that father and daughter preferred to be left alone, and kissing Coral and then bidding both good-night, he withdrew.

"It is strange," said the young man to himself on the dark stairs as he went down. "It is another secret added to those already in their keeping. Why didn't I follow that man from the house and keep him in sight? I might have gained a clue to it all and have armed myself for the future. He evidently intends to keep his word, that I shall see more of him, for he has the mien of a thorough rascal and the look of a bravo."

Meantime Jupiter Junk was some distance from the new abode of the fugitives.

He bent his head to the cold blast mingled with fine rain that swept the streets and brought up at last in another part of the city where he stopped to wet his whistle in a cozy gin-mill.

This done he proceeded on until he reached the house of the unidentified dead—the gloomy Morgue in whose depths end so many tragedies of real life, and where the detective picks up more than one clue that tightens the noose round the neck of the guilty.

The hour was not a proper one for a visit to the Morgue, but what of that?

The newspapers had informed him that the victim of the Coop had been taken thither, and he knew that he would find her on one of the pillowless slabs under the gas-light.

Jupiter Junk mentioned that he had visited the place for the purpose of getting a look at the woman who had been found dead in the Coop and was permitted to pass into the dead chamber.

He was the sole visitor there at the time.

The official who had received him went with him as far as the door, where he stopped and began to watch him as he moved forward in his eagerness to get a look at the face he sought.

There were three 'bodies on the cold slabs at the time and a bunch of clothing hanging over one led Jupiter Junk to the right spot.

He halted and leaned forward.

"Great Caesar!" fell in undertones from his tongue when he had looked a second.

"I didn't think she was the creature, but there she is and with her secret buried in her dead heart. It beats me all to pieces. I'm thunderstruck," and he looked like it as with almost colorless face and starting eyeballs he fell back and looked again at the dead.

"It'll be news for the major," continued Jupiter. "It'll strike him a blow right between the eyes as it struck me, and he will want to know what she was doing in that room and who killed her there. It's all a pretty pickle. We dare not employ any detective, no, no! We must be our own ferrets

this time and I suppose I'll have to be the main one."

When Jupiter had seen enough he passed from the room to meet the officer in another apartment.

"I saw the account in the newspapers, and I thought I might be able to identify her," said he. "I have a sister who has been missing for some time, and I feared that she had met with a sudden ending and become your guest," he smiled. "But, thank Heaven, this is an agreeable disappointment."

He roughly touched his hat and went away.

Barely had he reached the outside of the dead-house ere a man opened the door and looked after him.

"He came alone, I see," spoke this person to the officer who stood behind him. "He would not trust himself here in the daytime, but slips down after dark for a quiet look."

In another moment Jupiter, who was walking fast from the vicinity of the Morgue, had a shadow at his heels.

He looked back several times, lifting the rim of his hat for this purpose, but saw no one.

On, on he went, passing street-lamps with the hat down over his eyes as before, and trying to keep in the shadows as much as possible.

No one had followed him to the Morgue, and he had seen but the one man there. Certainly no one would follow him back to the heart of New York; no one would take enough interest in him to track him like a sleuth-hound from street to street.

Finally Jupiter drew up in front of his own retreat.

Before entering he looked at his watch, and then with furtive glances up and down the pave he dodged into the house and vanished.

The slight figure which had followed him all the way from the Morgue fell back a little and halted in the shadow of a tree that grew at the curb.

In the daytime this tree shaded the house, but at night it looked as dark as its surroundings.

Presently a light appeared in an upper window of Jupiter's abode, and caught the sharp eye of the lone watcher.

The room was lighted up for a few minutes, and the man at the tree kept regarding it as if loth to quit the spot while it gleamed.

Suddenly the light went out and the watcher hugged the tree a little closer.

Two minutes later the front door opened and some one slipped out.

He who emerged from the house came toward the tree and passed on to the nearest corner, where in the gleams of the corner lamp the man of the trail saw that, so far as dress was concerned, the other was not Jupiter Junk as he had come from the Morgue.

Of course he still wore the black beard, and was of the same height; but his garments were slicker, his pantaloons fitted him like those of a gentleman's, and he wore gloves.

This transformation caused a smile to ripple over the watcher's face, as he noted it in the momentary flash of the street lamp.

In another instant he was again following Jupiter, and that worthy led him a long chase, and at last dodged into one of the fashionable restaurants on Broadway, where he selected a chair at one of the tables.

Strolling into the same place, the tracker took another table and picked up the elegantly printed bill-of-fare, but at the same time he glanced over it at Junk.

There he sat in a fine suit of broadcloth, standing collar and shiny gloves.

His shirt front was immaculate, and his cuffs wore buttons that glittered in the sumptuous light, and altogether Jupiter looked more than ever like a gentleman of wealth, and not at all like a dark-faced thug, as he really was.

"I'll wait till he satisfies the inner man, and then I track him again," thought the shadow; and in another moment Solon Shook had given an order which would keep him at the table until Jupiter Junk got through with his repast.

The detective in the case had a new card in his hand.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LETTER THAT WAS LOST.

THE visit of Solon Shook, the detective, to the Tangle, where, as we have seen, he ran across Tommy Flyer, through whom he was enabled to hold an interview with Nelly Nappers, was not without some startling results.

At this meeting the ferret obtained possession of the note which Miss Nappers carried to the Coop the night of the crime, but did not deliver on account of finding the person for whom it was intended lying on the floor.

The letter, which was full of warning, was signed "Jen," which, so Nappers said, meant "Jericho Jen," whose address she gave the man of many trails.

Solon resolved at the termination of the interview, or rather, after perusing the note, to hunt up the writer at once.

Her abode was known to him through the confession of Tommy Flyer's friend, and thus armed he started out.

If Jericho Jen's note was a true warning, then he might obtain a clew to the strange man's enemies, and might be able to pick up something concerning the woman found dead in the Coop.

It was fully an hour after the reading of the letter that Solon Shook reached a little house, which fronted on one side of an alley, and in another minute he had rapped for admittance.

No one at first responded to his knock, but a short time after the door was opened and a woman confronted the ferret.

Solon walked in without being asked and turned in the brief hallway to find the female looking at him and admiring his supreme impudence.

She was tall and rawboned, and it was difficult to tell her age in the dim light that prevailed.

Could this be Jericho Jen?

The ferret thought he had heard of the woman who owned that name, but if she was the person, then she had changed her face and figure.

"Is Jennie in?" asked the searcher.

"Jen, you mean?" and the woman bent forward till her face almost touched the detective's. "Jen's gone—left for good this time."

That was bad.

"You don't mean to tell me that she's really gone?"

"I do, and I don't want you to hunt her up and get her to come back. I've had enough of her—a woman with strange ways in league with the powers of sin and death—no, I won't say that for that would be going pretty far; but she was a queer one for sure. If you don't believe it just go up to her late room and look."

"Isn't it like other rooms?"

"Just let me show you," and the lean-faced creature led the way up stairs with Solon at her heels and opened a door near the top of the flight.

"Look at the walls if you say she was an ordinary person," with a sweep of her hand. "Just take the walls in and see the outlandish stuff she's left behind."

There were some marks on the walls and the detective went forward to inspect them.

At first it all looked like a maze—a puzzle of some kind, with scrawls here and there, but it did not take him long to see that they were connected.

"It looks like writing," said the woman with a laugh. "I thought at first that she was too poor to buy paper, but she paid her rent to a cent; but she left that behind."

"She must have been a queer one. When did she quit you?"

"Last night."

"At what time?"

"'Bout nine I should say. She came down into my living room and said she guessed she'd give up her room. She seemed to have plenty of money and when she had squared up she had a good deal left."

"Did she go out often?"

"Not very. Jen—Jericho Jen, as she said 'they' called her, had no visitors all the time she was with me. When she went out it wasn't to stay long and when she came back she was alone."

"Jen was a rather good looking young lady."

"She'll never see thirty again," was the response. "Her sharp nose kept her from

being a beauty, but for all that there was something nice in her looks."

Solon Shook with another glance at the wall before him stepped back and looked the woman full in the face.

"I am a detective, madam."

"You don't tell me? A detective? What happened to Jen, and am I to be dragged into an affair after keeping out all my life?"

"I trust not, but I am here to learn all I can about your lodger who went off last night."

"What has she done?"

"Nothing against the peace and dignity of the State so far as I know, but—"

"But what's happened to her?"

"That's another matter. Would it shock you that Jericho Jen was dead?"

"Dead? Merciful heaven!" and the woman recoiled and caught the top of a chair for support. "You don't mean to tell me that she met with a fatal accident."

"It may be—in fact, she may even now be at the Morgue."

The woman shuddered and sat down to quiet her nerves.

"Come to think of it, she made me wonder if something strange wouldn't happen to her one of these days. She used to write letters some of which she posted, but the most of them she burned over there in the grate."

"Did she seem to get many letters?"

"Never one that I know of. She wrote them, but the answers never turned up so far as I know. I thought it strange, you know, and more than once when I passed her door and found it ajar I saw her at the table writing those letters."

"She never confided any secrets to you Mrs.—"

"Mrs. Knight, if you please."

"I asked you if you ever discovered anything about Jen's past history."

"Only a little and that was in a manner not very complimentary to me, but you see I just couldn't help it, coming to me as it did. Sometimes a lady hasn't all her wits about her, and, then, an unsealed letter is a great temptation anyhow."

"Of course," smiled the ferret. "I have run across such cases and, indeed, they are generally justifiable—the curiosity I mean."

Mrs. Knight took a long breath and continued:

"It happened this way: It was last week one night about nine and Jen had just gone out. I had occasion to go up-stairs and in passing her door what should lie there but a letter?"

"Lost by your roomer?"

"Just so and I thought of that the moment I saw it. When I picked it up with the intention of slipping it underneath the door I discovered that it was unsealed. I don't know what came over me, but I suppose I was curious to learn something about Jen and so, instead of slipping it back into her room, I carried it down to my own."

"Why, Mr. Detective, if that letter had contained a nation's secret I would have looked into it. You can just put yourself in my place. Wasn't it a trial now?"

"It was, indeed, Mrs. Knight. I can't say that I blame you."

"Thank you, sir. Well, I read that letter which was in Jen's handwriting. It filled three pages and she had written it pretty close. She intended to mail it—or perhaps she might have destroyed it as she had destroyed others—there's no telling—but there it was, a chapter from a woman's life and I'm bold enough to say that it was from her own."

"Did you preserve the letter?"

The woman hesitated.

"I—I did not intend to at first, but you see I hardly knew what I was doing, and when I finished reading it I locked it up in the bureau."

"Will you let me see it? But first, did the young woman ever miss it?"

"Oh, I think she did, for the next morning I heard her opening every drawer in the room and even turning down the bedclothes looking for something."

"She never asked you if you had found anything?"

"Bless you, no; Jen never said a word about losing anything at all. That would

have given the whole thing away, you see. But you want to see the letter, don't you?"

"If you please."

Mrs. Knight conducted Solon Shook to her own room where she unlocked a drawer in an old fashioned bureau and produced a letter which she announced as the one she had found at her roomer's door.

Solon found that it was written in a woman's hand somewhat cramped, and that it covered three pages.

"It's a strange letter," remarked Mrs. Knight. "You can sit here and go through it till I come back."

She retired leaving the city shadow alone and he at once fell to making out the letter.

At first it was commonplace enough and seemed to have been addressed to a man whose name was "Paul." The letter itself was addressed to "Dear Paul" and was dated a week before the present time.

As Mrs. Knight had said, it was a remarkable letter. It reminded the person for whom it was intended that the writer wanted justice, that it had been for years delayed, that she was a waif on the sea of life, that she had been rendered desperate by the "Hidden Hands" against whom she was even then struggling in the dark.

It was full of friendship for the man to whom it was addressed; but all at once the tone of the letter changed.

It was friendship no longer, but the fierce tiger hatred of a desperate creature.

"You will surrender up the secret within forty-eight hours, or you will feel the sting of the death-adder. Think not that I am harmless because I am a woman. You and all your satellites, whom I know, cannot prevent me from bringing all your schemes to naught. I can warn him, and will unless you make the present brighter. What do I owe you, anyhow? What do I owe Mr. Spiders, the man with the fair face and hidden claws? Tell me this, Sir Demon, and I will cut my talons and keep them trimmed."

"You are looking for him now. I know where he is and what he has in his possession. I know what you will give for it, but I will tell him of his danger—I will warn him unless you come to me within forty-eight hours and make reparation. When the little girl who first saw the world in the orange grove of the South came North—the fly in the net of guilt—you cajoled her until she was into the blaze—then with her wings burned and her heart seared, you threw her away to drift about the world, and at last to become Jericho Jen. You will want to kill for the box, but unless you come to me with open justice—you and your friends—Mr. Spiders and the dark-faced villain, who can wear broadcloth and rags in one night, I will blight all your prospects and warn him of the impending danger. This is the last letter. The dagger is sharpened; the serpent is ready to strike. Justice or the warning! The reparation or the stroke from Jericho Jen!"

Solon Shook reached the end of this strange letter just as Mrs. Knight re-entered the room. She stopped at sight of him, and he looked up with a faint smile.

"Isn't it a singular letter?" queried the woman.

"Rather an odd epistle," was the reply.

"Now answer me truly: Is Jen at the Morgue?"

"She is there."

"When did they find her dead?"

"Last night."

"In the river?"

"No, in a tenement-house."

"There? In heaven's name, what was she doing in such a place?"

"That is yet to be discovered. It may be that she went to see the person to whom she sent a note by a little girl?"

"She sent a note, then? Was it anything like this? I found it half burned in the grate."

The woman placed in Solon's hand a piece of paper which read in part like the note which Miss Nappers had failed to deliver. Evidently Jericho Jen had re-written the note and had destroyed her first effort.

"I'll take this along, too," said the detective, pocketing both the letter and the partially burnt note. "You need not appear in this case, Mrs. Knight. I don't think you need be known in it at all," and he went off

saying to himself that he would search out the identity of the persons mentioned in the letter, for in his hand he held a clue.

It was the night that followed this day of investigation, that Solon Shook came across Jupiter Junk at the Morgue and followed him home and thence to the restaurant where we left the pair, the one enjoying a costly meal and the other watching him between bites.

When Jupiter finished his supper, he pushed back his chair and drew his wallet.

It happened that the man's hands were in the light and the detective saw from the table that they were soft, though dark, and in taking out some silver something not very large fell to the floor.

Jupiter may have thought it a dime, for he disdained to look for it, but not so the acute detective.

Waiting till Jupiter had left the restaurant, he slipped back to where he had sat and looked over the floor.

All at once he caught sight of something that glittered at a table leg and the next moment it was in his grasp.

It turned out to be a link like the link of a watch chain, and it seemed to the detective that it had been wrenched from its companion by main force.

In another moment the gold link had been transferred to the detective's pocket, and he left the place to see nothing of Jupiter Junk underneath the lamps of Gotham.

CHAPTER X.

THE FERRET MEETS MOTHER BLUEBOTTLE.

THE identity of the woman found strangled in the Coop remained a mystery all through.

Of the many thousands who visited the Morgue, attracted thither by the newspaper accounts of the singular affair, none seemed to recognize the body, and at the end of the proper time it was conveyed to a spot in the potter's field and there buried.

This caused the subject of the tragedy to be dismissed from the minds of many, but it only whetted the city ferret's appetite, and Solon Shook stood on the trail more eager than before to reach the end of the tangle.

Provided with the letter which Mrs. Knight had placed in his hands, he set about with renewed zeal to unravel the mystery, and his footsteps went toward the scene of the dark work—the little end room in the Coop.

Did the ferret expect to pick up a link there? After the thorough search which more than one detective had given the apartment, what was he to look for there?

It was night when he entered the old shell of a building and made his way up the stairs.

Here and there he was met by some of the denizens of the human beehive, but he kept on until he reached the door of the chamber of mystery.

He passed Mother Bluebottle's door to find it shut and a little light beyond.

He recalled his visit to the Amazon in company with Policeman Covert, but this time he had no idea of disturbing the old lady unless something turned up different from what he expected.

Surely some one in the Coop knew something about the man whom little Miss Nappers still averred she found dead on the floor of the fatal room; but in this regard Mother Bluebottle had given him no satisfaction.

Solon Shook had a key which opened the little room.

Shutting the door carefully behind him and closing the keyhole from observation without, the transom having been made dark beforehand, he set about examining the room.

The detective went through the bureau again.

He opened the drawer in which he had found the card concealed in the pack of dirty linen, but to his astonishment the linen was not there.

He could not have been mistaken in regard to the drawer.

It was the lower one and he had opened it again, but the pack of linen had vanished.

He thought for a moment that he might have replaced it, but in the wrong drawer, but a thorough search of the bureau failed to unearth it and he smiled to himself.

It was evident that some one familiar with

the premises had removed the garments or perhaps the man himself—Nappers's "corpse"—had returned for his own.

Solon went through the bureau carefully for clues, but everything had been taken out.

The longer he searched the deeper became his conviction that the room had been visited by some one since the removal of the dead woman to the Morgue.

He was in the act of opening a stand-drawer when he was attracted by a noise in the hall.

In an instant he turned the gas so low as to render the room almost without light, and drawing toward the portal he stopped and listened.

That some one was in the hall he was quite certain, for footsteps drew nearer to the door and at last halted there.

Solon Shook waited for a key to be inserted in the lock as he believed one would be, and sure enough it was so.

He heard the click of the bolt as it was forced back by the key, and the following moment the door swung inward and a figure came in.

Half-concealed by a cupboard that filled one corner of the chamber, for all at once the detective had retreated to it, he looked at the new-comer.

At first he could not believe the evidence of sight, but he was obliged to confess mentally that the gigantic figure of Mother Bluebottle stood before him.

She evidently had not heard his coming to the place for she went direct to the bureau, but all once stopped and looked at the little bluish flame that crowned the burner.

Then the truth seemed to flash across the woman's mind.

Some one had lighted the gas in the room; but who?

Solon saw a look of bewilderment settle over the woman's face, for she was deeply puzzled and for a full minute she stood in the middle of the apartment and stared at the light.

"It's been dark ever since they took her off," he heard her say. "I haven't heard a soul in here since, but there's the gas burning and gas don't light itself without help."

She went to the burner and turned the light a little higher.

"It's been burning some time, for the burner's hot," she went on. "Is it possible that he's been back and forgot to put it out?"

Who was "he?"

The detective watched the astonished woman with the deepest interest for he felt that she had entered the room for a purpose.

"Well, I can't fathom it," she went on at last, falling back. "He may have been here, but seems to me he would have dropped in to see me. Maybe he didn't have time, and then p'raps they was hot on his trail, and he thought it best to do his work quietly and slip out o' the Coop."

Mother Bluebottle crossed the room to the stand and tried the drawer. She found it locked, but she opened it and took a look through it, at the same time running her hand back and forth on the inside.

She nodded as if to say that some one had been to the room and to that particular piece of furniture, for with a smile she fell back and went to the wall opposite where the detective stood.

"This will prove whether he's been here," she muttered lifting one hand and feeling along the wall at a place on a level with her head.

Suddenly a little door opened in the wall and her hand was inserted.

"I guess I'm right. He's been here and taken it away," Solon heard her say as she withdrew her hand. "At any rate he's stripped the treasure house some time, and it may have been after the affair of the other night."

She closed the door in the wall and turned to leave the room.

As yet she had not caught sight of the detective who had let no movement of hers escape him.

But now all at once, as if fate was against him, Mother Bluebottle uttered a sharp cry and threw up her hands. She had discovered Solon by the cupboard.

In another instant the detective stepped forth and Mother Bluebottle clutched the table for support.

Her face turned white and then flushed as she saw the detective advancing, but suddenly she left the table and started toward the door.

"Don't be in a hurry, Mother Bluebottle," said Solon. "You are not to be harmed while I'm here."

"Who are you?" and then she seemed to recognize him. "Oh, I see—the man who came in with Policeman Tom and questioned me about the woman found dead in this room?"

"The same, if you please," answered Solon with a smile. "You know me, I see."

"Yes, yes; you are that person. Well, I see you've come back to take another look at the premises. Haven't you discovered anything yet?"

"That is a question not to be answered in full just now."

"That's like all your man-hunters; you never tell what you find till you're ready to throw out your nets and catch the birds. That's a very good plan from your standpoint, I guess, but I don't think it so very pleasant for the birds, ha, ha!"

It was easy to see that the woman's humor was strained, for she grew white again and looked furtively at the door.

"You knew the gentleman who occupied this room, Mother Bluebottle?" said Solon.

"Me know him? You forget, sir, that I never make acquaintances and—"

"But you were his neighbor, you remember—lived almost next door, and seeing him often must have brought about an acquaintance, however slight."

"Why should I become acquainted with him?" and she seemed to lean toward Solon Shook with her great hands clinched and a flash of sudden fire in her eyes.

"Don't try to throw me off the scent, Mother Bluebottle. I am confident that you want to see the guilty punished and everything connected with this foul crime brought to light."

"Of course, but you want to connect me with it."

"How connect you with it, I would like to know?"

"Why, by proving that I knew the man who had this room. The woman was found dead here, and don't you see that if I knew the one I might be supposed to know the other?"

"But the man you knew," asserted Solon, looking straight at her. "If you had no acquaintance, what took you to the stand and bureau since coming into the room, and how came you to find the concealed niche in the wall?"

This staggered the Amazon, and she threw a swift glance toward the spot where she had found the little door in the wall.

"If I knew him I can keep what I knew about him to myself, can't I? I know that you are a detective, but you mustn't think that you can force me to tell you that which I do not care to reveal. You have been watching me, I see. You saw me open the niche in the wall; you have had your eyes upon me ever since I entered this room, and you are trying to make me tell you what I can keep in spite of a thousand of you man-hunters!"

Mother Bluebottle towered above Solon, the ferret, like an avalanche.

She looked dangerous from flashing eyes to clinched hands, and her face, white and tensely drawn again, seemed to tell him that he was in imminent peril.

"What is it you want to know about him?" she suddenly asked.

"Where is he?"

"That's a question which I couldn't answer in full if I would. He may be five hundred miles from here, or he may be nearer than you think. Why don't you go out and find him, Solon Shook? They call you a prince of clue-finders, but they must over-rate your keenness if you can't find the man who once lived here."

"You were on terms with him."

"There it is again! You can stand there and say that without any proof—"

"Beware, Mother Bluebottle; I may have more proof than you imagine."

"That's a bluff," smiled the woman, suddenly controlling her temper a little. "I am not to be inveigled into treachery by you. I won't tell you anything."

"Very well. Keep your secret, but the outcome may give you more trouble than you care to meet."

"What's that?"

In another instant she was down upon Solon Shook, before he could lift a hand or move a foot.

She descended upon him with the agility of a pantheress, and he was seized and shuffled across the floor to the wall, where he was held as in a vise.

"You will give me trouble? You will drag me from my nest in the Coop and mix me up in this business, will you? Take care, Solon Shook! If you try anything of that kind I will rid the world of one of its man-hunters. I am not to be dragged into this affair. If I knew the man, that is my secret, and if I knew the woman, that is my secret, too."

The detective could not wriggle out of the Amazon's grip, but all at once he was released, and in a second the old lady had swept from the room, leaving him against the wall, with the prints of her fingers on his throat and the sound of her heavy footsteps in the hall beyond.

Solon did not crave another meeting with the tigress of the Coop.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAN WITH THE KNIFE.

WHILE the detective had not learned very much by his meeting Mother Bluebottle in the room of the tragedy, he had obtained a bit of news which he felt would soon throw some light upon that which was dark.

It was now evident to Solon Shook that the man whom Miss Nappers supposed was dead on the floor when she entered the room was alive and in hiding somewhere, for the giantess was acquainted with him and knew some of the secrets of the end room.

He did not quit the room until a few minutes after Mother Bluebottle's departure.

When he went out it was after another turning over of everything in the chamber and then he halted in the hall.

The old lady had retired to her own room and the ferret saw nothing of her.

A light was visible over the door, and he thought he saw a peculiar shadow on the ceiling, but that was all; he passed to the stairs and ascended.

At the door of Old Oliver's former abode he stopped and listened.

He did not know that the old diamond-maker and his daughter had deserted the nest, but he was soon to make the discovery.

A peep into the apartment convinced him that the birds had flown, and finding nothing there to reward his search, he turned and went down-stairs again.

On the street below he stopped and looked up at the Coop.

It stood tall and black against the sky, and here and there he saw lights where the inmates were still out of bed.

Suddenly a window was raised and the head and shoulders of a woman were pushed over the meager sill.

He knew the face at once; it was Mother Bluebottle's.

The detective pretended not to see her, but walked away, turning the nearest corner but to look round it the following moment to see the sash fall and the head vanish.

Solon dodged into a doorway for a moment, but as no one came his way he crossed the street and took up a position from whence he could observe the Coop.

It took good eyes to keep track of the various people who entered and left the old nest in the rather poor light afforded by the nearest lamps, but at last the vigils of the ferret were rewarded.

He saw a bulky figure emerge from the trap and eyed it narrowly.

That it was Mother Bluebottle he did not doubt, and he kept watching her as she walked away.

The old lady was quite agile despite her bulk, and with a shawl thrown over her broad shoulders and drawn about her face, she was pretty well disguised.

Mother Bluebottle evidently was off on some mission, and when she had turned a corner the agile detective slipped from his doorway and followed her.

It was no trick at all to keep such a creature in sight. He might have followed the old lady in the dark.

Mother Bluebottle looked over her shoulder at odd intervals, but did not seem to catch sight of the shadow at her heels. She pushed on, turning several corners until at length she dodged into an alley-like street and suddenly vanished.

Solon Shook reached the mouth of this street just in time to hear a door shut, but not in time to see exactly where it was.

He was at fault at last.

With all his keenness the Amazon of the Coop had baffled him and he had to smile as he stood in the little street looking at the line of doors on the right, wondering which one had opened for Mother Bluebottle.

The city shadow was very anxious to discover the house entered by the old woman, and he slipped down the narrow sidewalk looking at the doors, all of which were tightly closed to him.

In his mind the keen tracker selected a certain house and watched it a few moments.

Of course Mother Bluebottle had visited the place on an important errand of some kind, and for her to come to the house at that hour proved to Solon Shook that her visit was connected with the murder in the Coop.

Suddenly he saw a light spring into being in a room on the ground floor of one of the houses in the dark row and this caused him to approach it.

But beyond the window everything was closed to him, for the bare streak of light was not sufficient to let him look into the room there.

Mother Bluebottle may have entered that house though he could hear nothing of her.

Solon believed that he had lost her there.

He was still at the window when something from above descended upon his shoulders and he staggered back with a suppressed cry, but maintained his equilibrium with difficulty.

There was no doubt that the object which had descended was aimed at him, for a glance upward enabled him to see a head withdrawn from the window and the sash fell with a bang.

Solon Shook righted himself in the middle of the street and then fell back to the other side.

At the same time the light beyond the curtain disappeared and the whole house became dark.

Half a minute later the door of a house close to the one from which he had been struck was cautiously opened and a head protruded.

It was the head of a man and Solon Shook who had taken refuge in a hallway eyed it closely.

Up and down the narrow street looked the person in the opposite door.

Presently he stepped from the house and started off up the street, looking now and then over his shoulders as if inviting the detective to follow. But Solon did nothing of the kind.

If it was a trick to get the ferret to reveal his hiding-place he did not succeed, for he let the man go and continued to watch the other house.

Ten minutes passed and he was still at the post of duty.

What had become of Mother Bluebottle?

At the end of another ten minutes the front door of the watched premises opened slowly and the figure so well known to the ferret edged its way out.

Mother Bluebottle might be going back to the Coop.

She appeared to see nothing of the man who had followed her to the street and at last she moved away.

Solon let her go.

Perhaps she had accomplished her errand; if so, she was ready to return.

The old lady vanished where the streets were wider and more densely populated, and after a few minutes Solon crossed the dimly-lighted street.

The light was still visible in the same room but the window gave him no better clue as to who was in the house than before.

By and by Solon Shook made his way

to the end of the house, found the right allotment of back-yard and crept forward.

The dark rear of the old house rose before him.

It was as dark as one would care to find a house, but the detective reached a window very close to the ground and dropped to the ground there.

Silence was holding court beyond the window and he could not make out the faintest tracery of light.

This went on for a few moments when there flashed across the detective's face a stream of light so brilliant as to throw him back and blind him for an instant.

It came from beyond the shutter and it seemed to him that some one had suddenly passed an electric globe close to the shutter for the purpose of discovering him.

He shaded his eyes for a moment and then went back to the window.

He saw into the room now.

It was as if the light had revealed everything and he saw a cramped room poorly furnished and occupied.

It had but one tenant at the time of the detective's look and that tenant was a man standing at a table upon which lay several odd-looking knives.

They were all without sheaths, though each was of the bowie pattern, and near the three lay also a revolver.

The man was not so desperate looking that he should have all those weapons at his elbow.

He might have been forty; his form was spare and well knit and his face had upon it a three weeks' beard, while his eyes rather well imbedded in his head were dark and restless.

"This is the man Miss Nappers found on the floor in the Coop," muttered Solon. "She has described him to me so well that I know I have found him. He wasn't dead at all, no matter what Nappers may have thought at the time. He is just now a very lively corpse and would astonish the girl if he could confront her."

He saw the man who was in his shirt-sleeves pick up one knife after another and feel both edge and point with his brown thumbs.

In like manner he examined the six-shooter, laying it down after the inspection, when he looked toward the window against whose shutter the face of the keen tracker was pressed.

There was no doubt that Mother Bluebottle had seen that very man.

All at once he started from the table and opening a wardrobe donned a coat of dark goods, put on a hat which he pulled down over his brows in front of a cracked mirror, and seemed about to quit the place.

But instead of doing so he sat down and played with the three knives, smiling in a manner that showed his teeth—a wolfish grin that meant mischief somewhere along the line.

Solon Shook did not for a moment relax his vigilance.

He watched every movement of the strange man in the room, trying to photograph his personality upon his brain, as it were, and when he suddenly sprang up and thrust one of the knives into an inner pocket he felt sure that something was to come.

The other knives and revolvers were put away and the man lowered the gas.

"Now! I know where to find it and I will have my own or some scoundrel's life."

Shook heard these words as they fell in grating accents from the man's tongue, and the following moment he was at the door with just light enough in the room to let the detective see his figure.

"I must not lose him now. He is off on a mission of desperation," thought Solon. "That is the man of the end-room—that is the person who holds in his bosom the secret of the Coop. I sha'n't lose him no matter where he goes."

It is one thing to make a resolve, but quite another to carry it out.

Solon Shook had realized this before and was to do so again and that very night.

He bounded back to the street and saw the man emerge from the house.

He saw him slip down the alley-like passage toward the broader thoroughfare, and vaulting over the fence that separated them,

he dodged through the shadows after his prey.

To keep that man in sight was Solon Shook's intention.

To keep after him no matter if he crossed the city—to see where he went and what he did—this was the sworn determination of the tracker in the case.

The man in the slouched hat took Solon Shook down one street and up another.

He did not seem to dream that some one might be at his heels; he did not look behind, nor stop to ambush the sleek trailer of New York.

At length he dodged into a narrow opening in a fairly respectable quarter of the city.

Solon heard him on a stairway, and then lost the sounds he made.

"Can it be?" ejaculated the detective, as he drew back and looked up at the house.

"Has that man come to this place to use that blade upon Miss Nappers to keep her from telling what she saw in the Coop?"

The thought went through Solon like a dagger and roused the lion in his nature.

CHAPTER XII.

A FEW MOMENTS TOO LATE.

It might have been a good thing for Nelly Nappers that night that she did not occupy her room in the building at the time of the man's visit.

He had come to the place for some dark purpose, as the hidden detective could readily imagine, for he had seen him secrete a knife in his bosom, and had caught the dangerous glitter of his eyes.

By-and-by he emerged from the house with a look of disappointment on his face and trotted off again.

For a moment Solon Shook did not know just what course to pursue.

Perhaps the man had struck for all.

He might not have encountered the success looked for in the old house, but still he might have used the blade.

Should he go up and see?

In doing so he might lose the man altogether, and at last he concluded to track him again.

He led the ferret a merry chase this time, dodging around many a corner and at times almost lost.

Solon knew that much depended on his keeping the man in sight, and he did so.

At last he stopped and looked up at a certain house half savagely.

"He has found the place at last," muttered Solon. "My tiger has found the game he seeks, and if he did not succeed altogether in the other house he hopes to in this one."

For ten minutes Solon's quarry stood in a shadow of a tree in front of the house and kept his eye fastened upon a certain window.

He seemed to be debating in his mind the best course to pursue, and that it was a lively mental battle the sharp-eyed ferret could see.

All at once he vanished by plunging into the dark mouth of the nearest alley, and when Solon reached it he was not to be seen.

Baffled again by the man with the knife, the detective walked down the alley and listened.

Here and there he caught gleams of light in the windows on either side of the narrow thoroughfare, but he saw nothing at all of his prey.

He stood thus five minutes, when he saw a figure vault lightly over a close fence and drop to the ground like a tiger-cat.

It was the man with the knife.

Perhaps he had accomplished his purpose; at any rate he heard a light chuckle of satisfaction as the man slouched toward the street and Solon let him go.

He felt that to track him now would be to be led over the same ground he had already traversed at the man's heels, and he remained where he was.

Suddenly his ears caught a loud voice, and the next moment a window was raised near him and he saw a man's head.

"By Jove! it must have been Satan himself," exclaimed this personage. "He came in like a whirlwind and went like one. Thank fortune the infernal knife missed my heart though he struck for it. Where's Spiders or Junk?"

The sash was lowered and the head vanished.

Solon crossed the alley and looked up at the house over whose door he had seen the head and was about to give it a more minute inspection when heavy footfalls came down the street and a man almost brushed him aside as he strode to the door.

In another moment he had inserted a key into the lock and opened the portal.

"Junk, is that you?" Solon heard some one call before the door was closed.

"No, it's Spiders," and the lock clicked again and the detective had to content himself with remaining outside.

If he could have entered the house at that moment he would have seen the man bound to the stairway, throw open the door there and flit up the steps.

He burst into a lighted room in the middle of which reclined a man in a chair, with his garments disordered and many things in the apartment topsy-turvy.

"Did you see him, Spiders?" gasped this individual.

"See who?"

"The tiger who came and went before one could say Jack Robinson!"

"I saw no one."

"You didn't, eh? Well, he's not been gone three minutes, and it's a miracle that I'm here to tell you that he was in this room."

"What took place? You must have had an encounter with him."

"Didn't I, though? Look at my clothes. We had it rough and tumble for a moment despite his cleverness. At one time I wouldn't have given a penny for my chances, for he had me against the wall; but his feet slipped as he struck and my clothes got it—see!" and the rent neatly made by a knife was shown, at which Spiders grinned and perhaps thanked his stars that he had not had such a narrow escape.

"What did he want?" asked Spiders.

"What would any one want who would come here with a knife in his sleeve?" was the rejoinder. "He thinks he got what he came for, but catch me napping will you, Spiders?"

"Oh, he wanted the box, did he?"

"He got that—carried it off with him, but when he comes to look into it there will be a scene not down on the bills."

"He got the box, you say?"

"Got it—empty!"

"Thank fortune."

"Well you may and give me a little credit too as you go along. I had made provision for this thing after what I had heard. He was sure to make an effort to get it back if he was in the land of the living. He came and went like a tiger. Somehow or other he seemed to know where to come. Where's Jupiter?"

Spiders frowned and said he didn't know.

"I wished for him a thousand times while I was having it out with that man," said the other, who was Major Bullion. "He is so strong and agile, you know."

Mr. Spiders didn't say anything, but looked at the white-faced man in the chair and waited for him to proceed.

"Here he comes now!" exclaimed the major, turning his face toward the stairs. "That's Jupiter, for once a little behind time. Oh, what a picnic he would have had with the tiger."

Spiders waited for the opening of the door with ill grace, recalling perhaps his last encounter with Jupiter.

The moment the stair door opened and the brown face of Jupiter Junk made its appearance there, he fell back a step and returned the look with interest.

Jupiter came forward looking at Major Bullion whose face told him that something out of the ordinary had happened, and all at once he asked, "What's happened? You look as though you'd passed through a thrashing machine."

Spiders turned his face to grin, but the major did not show any merriment.

"I thought you settled him?" he growled.

"By Jove! I thought so, too," was the reply. "He's been here, eh?"

"That he has—been here as you can see by the condition of the furniture and this rent in my vest."

"The knife, eh?"

"Yes, and but for the slipping of a foot

I might not be in condition to tell the story of his visit."

"I would be deuced sorry if it were thus, major," answered Jupiter. "Where was that man?" and he turned and glared at Spiders who flinched a little under the look.

"He came in like yourself a little too late."

"Mebbe he timed himself."

Spiders flushed at this, and said nothing.

"He carried off the box, Jupiter, but there wasn't anything in it."

"Got his own back in a measure. That's not so bad—it's better than going off and leaving a dead man in this room."

"Of course."

Jupiter went over and sat down near the major.

He was still dressed in the good clothes he wore at the restaurant and before he spoke again he drew one of his gloves and threw it upon the table.

"I see. Jupiter Junk has to go back and play tiger for the firm; that's what he's got to do."

"I wish you had settled him in the Coop."

"Really I thought I had," was the reply. "You see a man misses it sometimes, and things don't always turn out just as he'd like to have 'em."

"That's true, Junk. What have you found out about the woman?"

Jupiter stole a sly glance at Spiders who was all ears listening while he watched him furtively.

"I've seen the body."

"You have? Where is it?"

"I saw it at the Morgue."

"You went there for that purpose, of course?"

"Nothing else would have taken Jupiter Junk there at this time. She's there sure enough, the woman found dead in the little room by Tom Covert and Nappers."

"Well, who is she, Junk?"

Spiders seemed to lean forward in his eagerness to catch the dark man's reply.

"It's just who I had an idea it was," said he. "It's Jen."

Spiders seemed to start a little, but Major Bullion's face gleamed with satisfaction.

"Dead for sure this time, eh?" he exclaimed.

"Certainly; people who can breathe don't lie on the slabs of the Morgue you know."

"Do they know her there?"

"Not yet."

"You didn't give any information?"

"Of course not. She's dead enough this time. But what took her to his room and who killed her?"

Major Bullion slowly shook his head.

"Mebbe she went to tell him something," whispered Junk.

"It might be."

"I don't think he would have choked her to death—"

"Was it that way?" broke in the major.

"That's what they say and the papers tell the same story, you know."

"Might I ask a question?" and the figure of Spiders came toward Jupiter Junk.

Jupiter looked up and their eyes met.

"What is it, Mr. Spiders?" asked the major.

"How long after Mr. Junk's encounter with Tarsus was the woman found dead by the policeman?"

In an instant the lip of Jupiter Junk was bitten half-way through.

"How should I know?" cried that worthy, his hand closing madly in his lap. "I didn't stay, sir!"

In another instant he rose and confronted Spiders, who showed some nerve as he faced him about three steps away.

"I merely asked the question," said he with dogged coolness. "I thought Mr. Junk might know."

Major Bullion saw what was brewing, for he suddenly threw up his hand at the same time bending forward and looking first at Jupiter and then at Spiders.

"I won't provoke a tiff," said the dark-faced man as he went back to the chair. "I want it understood however, that I don't like that reptile. I never did. I objected to entering the game, as you know, when I heard he was in it, and I hate him with all my heart. Time will come when I will have it out with him, but not now, not now, major. He's your pard and I don't want to

hurt your feelings. I've seen him in other dress and he knows it. He hasn't always worn those fine feathers and he's entitled to another name. Mr. Spiders, eh? Oh, it makes me laugh."

As for Spiders, he returned Jupiter's look with interest and walked over to the window, leaving Major Bullion and the dark-faced villain conversing in whispers at the table.

The breach between Jupiter and Mr. Spiders was widening.

CHAPTER XIII.

OVERHEARD.

THE New York detective wished, after he had watched the house awhile, that he had followed the man with the knife, even though he had taken him back over the same ground.

He did not see any chance of getting into the house to see what was transpiring there, but after awhile, and just when he was on the point of going off, the front door opened and a man slipped out.

At first Solon Shook thought it was Jupiter Junk, but instead of being that individual it was the elegant Spiders, not then known by that name to the ferret.

It was evident that Spiders had left the place in high dudgeon, for he stopped on the steps and looked over his shoulders with a look of rage, and the next moment he betook himself off.

Solon was ready to take after the first man who came from the house, for at that time everything was fish that came to his net, and in a little while he was playing spy to Mr. Spiders's strange role.

Spiders went off with springy step, and led the detective almost to the river before he showed signs of stopping.

Even then he did not halt over five minutes, and that was for a dram, after which he resumed his tramp.

Spiders was a fine looking fellow a bit past thirty, with a dark mustache, the ends of which he cultivated, and hands as well formed as a beauty's.

Perhaps Solon would have preferred tracking Jupiter Junk or even the man with the knife, but as it was Spiders, he put up with it.

Spiders, so cordially hated by Junk, entered a house not far from the Bridge and vanished.

Five minutes later he emerged from it, turned back, doubled as it were, but with the trail-fox at his heels.

He kept on until he entered the Coop, somewhat to the detective's surprise, and Solon entered after him.

Few people who came to the Coop were suspected by the many inmates of the old shell.

They came and went without questioning, and since the murder the tenants seemed to think that those who were not "regulars" belonged to the secret police, and hence they did not look after them.

Spiders ascended the stairs till he reached Mother Bluebottle's door, when he stopped and inclined his head toward it.

Seemingly satisfied that all was right, he turned the knob and entered.

In an instant he was greeted by an exclamation of astonishment, and his name was spoken in accents of wonder.

Solon Snook, leaning against the plastering near the door which Spiders had closed, heard the Amazon's words:

"You don't come very often to Mother Bluebottle, Parry," said she. "Let me see: It's been a month since you've poked your head inside my door and—"

"Just three weeks and three days," interrupted Spiders, who had seated himself in one of Mother Bluebottle's rickety chairs. "You see I don't pretend to keep a diary, but I carry dates in my head for all. Just three weeks since I was here."

"But you know what's happened?"

"About the death in the room at the end of the hall?"

"Yes, and how they've been investigatin' it."

"I know something about it, of course, but I haven't had the chance to know as much as you should have picked up."

"There's where you're wrong, Parry Spiders," laughed the old woman. "I live here, of course, but I'm next door to ignorance in regard to the crime."

"I don't see how that can be. You certainly heard something that night. There must have been a struggle, for a man can't strangle a woman without some noise."

"I don't know what some men can do."

"Were you sound asleep that night?"

"Not all the time, Parry. You see I had the rheumatism and it kept me groanin' and gruntin' and—"

"Maybe you made too much noise yourself, Mother Bluebottle."

"I can't say. I know that they found her dead in the chair, the cop and the kid."

"Nobody came down-stairs, eh?"

"Bless you! the pair's gone—run off entirely."

An exclamation of surprise fell from Spider's lips and the detective waited for the Amazon to proceed.

"They went off slick and neat, takin' with 'em all the diamond-makin' traps that would be o' use to 'em in their new quarters."

"When did they go?"

"I can't say just when, but some time between darkness and dawn, and I know they're gone for I've been up in the nest an' empty it is without a sign o' where they went."

"You should have sent me word."

"Just wait till I had a chance. How did I know where you were, you slip round so much you know."

A moment's silence followed this and Mother Bluebottle crossed the room and tried the door.

Fortunately it was locked, having been locked by a catch-bolt when Spiders shut it, else the listening ferret in the hall might have had another experience with the immense hand of Mother Bluebottle.

"Look 'here, Parry, when am I to have that money?" suddenly asked the coarse voice of the woman.

"When I get my pull."

"That's the same old song. When you get your pull! When will it come your way?"

"Pretty soon now."

"Next week?"

"Perhaps. Are you in a hurry?"

"Kinder so. What if I should take a notion to get out of the city for a spell?"

"You quit New York?" exclaimed Spiders. "Why, they couldn't take you from the Coop by main force."

"You don't know."

"It's too late to try the sea-shore."

"I know that. I haven't said anything about the sea-shore. I don't mean that I might want to go there; but I might want to take a little trip, you know, Spiders."

"For how long, Mother Bluebottle?"

"That depends," was the reply. "I might take a notion to come back soon, and, then, I might conclude to remain away for good."

"Come, you don't mean that?"

Spiders laughed in a bantering way and was answered in a snarl by the woman.

"I guess Mother Bluebottle knows her business," she said. "I ought to know what's best for me just now."

"But what would the Coop do?"

"What do I care for the Coop?"

"Do they talk of dragging you into court about the murder?"

"I wouldn't go if they did! I don't intend to give these sleuth-hounds a chance to make anything by pumping me."

"That's a good idea, but take care that they don't get out of you all you know and you be none the wiser for it."

"I had one against the wall not very long ago and I had a notion to show him how strong I was."

"What, you have a tiff with a detective?"

"Didn't I?"

"Where was it at?"

"Never mind that—I had the 'tiff' as you call it, and he nearly had something else. I don't intend to let these men track me and play spy at my heels—not while I'm Mother Bluebottle!"

If Solon Shook could have looked into the room at that moment he would have seen the same flashing eyes that glared at him when their owner held him against a wall with ten

hot fingers at his throat and her powerful figure before him.

"It's come to this with me, Spiders—I don't intend to be hunted in any manner by these detectives, and the first one I see after me I intend to strangle. Look at these hands."

"They can do the job in fine style," laughed Spiders into whose face the Amazon was holding her big red hands. "I don't want them at my weasand; wouldn't have them there for the world."

"They've been at more than one throat in their time," chuckled Mother Bluebottle. "I know what they can do."

"No doubt of that. But coming back to other topics. So the pair up-stairs have left the cage?"

"Gone, I told you."

"You couldn't say where I might find them?"

"Does the girl strike you, Parry Spiders? Have you a soft spot in your heart for the diamond-maker's daughter? She's pretty—good enough for any one, I guess; but she's not for you."

"For some one else, then?"

"For the young man who used to come in and chat with Old Oliver and the bird."

"I know him. By Jove! I've hit it. They'll be sure to let him know where they are, and all I have to do to find out their new retreat is to watch him."

"That's pretty shrewd in you, Parry," cried Mother Bluebottle. "You always was a clever one."

Perhaps Spiders smiled at this compliment—Solon Shook did not know—at any rate he laughed and the old woman went on:

"I won't say that the affair in the end-room took them away; but they went soon after. Mebbe they thought they might be wanted by the police—I don't know. Oliver Onyx is a queer one, anyhow, and the girl, Coral, is as trim as a lark. They're gone—that's all there is to it, and you're left in the lurch."

"I'll see what's become of them. They're too precious a pair not to be hunted up or down. There's too much at stake just now, and if I don't find them, why, I can't divide with you this week or next."

"Find 'em by all means!" exclaimed Mother Bluebottle. "I can't remain here that long. Some night I'll vanish, that I will. I won't be watched by the police, and if I stay here I may have to kill somebody."

"I'll be going, then," answered Spiders. "You don't know where Old Oliver and Coral are, so I'll go off and play a shrewd game myself. I know what that girl is worth. She's worth a cool million."

"To whom, Parry?"

"To the right man."

"To you?"

"Perhaps."

"What is the major doing?"

"Waiting patiently."

"And that friend of yours, Jupiter Junk?"

"To Tartarus with that villain!" cried Spiders, striking something, the table, probably. "We've got to come to it before long, and I intend to see that his usefulness is curtailed."

"He's dangerous, Parry."

"Dangerous to those who fear him. He's a brute, and if the detectives had the right tip—"

"Come, don't spoil it all," broke in the woman. "There's another way of making Jupiter Junk harmless. When you want his claws clipped say so."

"Clip them now. I say clip them at once, for if you do not, Mother Bluebottle, I will have to play a hand that will render things in the game disagreeable."

"Where is he?"

"I left him with the major."

"To-night?"

"An hour ago."

"In some ways that man is useful, but in others dangerous."

"A reptile in the nest!"

"That's right, Spiders. I'll see Jupiter, but don't forget the money. Five hundred dollars within three days."

"Make it a million," laughed the man.

"There was that much in the box which the chick lost and you are entitled to one-third of it. Get your share."

Spiders seemed to come toward the door.

and Solon Shook fell back among the shadows of the corridor.

In another moment the door opened and Spiders came out.

"Lost the bird, have I?" he was heard to say to himself. "Now I'll have to watch Roger Rex till I've located her. 'She's worth too much for me to lose at this time. It's Coral or nothing.'"

CHAPTER XIV.

CORNERING MISS NAPPERS.

As Major Bullion remarked to Spiders, the man who recovered the box at the expense of a tussle in his (the major's) room was destined to capture a surprise when he opened it in the seclusion of his own den to which he had carried it after the struggle.

He lost color and turned toward the door as if about to spring up and rush from the place.

The box was empty!

Yes, the black box which he had wrenched from Major Bullion did not contain a single thing, and for half a minute he held it in his hands while he stared at it, his lips almost bloodless and his eyes on fire.

Was it for this he had fought like a tiger? Was it to carry home an empty treasure box he had glided through the shadows of New York, with perhaps some cunning detective at his heels? He cursed himself when he thought of it.

But there lay the box, as empty as when it came from the hands of its maker; the red lining in the bottom was not covered with anything precious, and he could only look and swear again.

"Shall I go back and kill him?" he grated. "Shall I return and show him that I am still a tiger, more so than I was when I cut him down? I know where he is—I know where all of them are, and I am going to be master of the situation. They may rob me and for a while get the best of me, but in the end—ah! in the end—I'll show them that I'm worth a dozen dead men."

He placed the box upon the table, and falling back in his chair gazed at it awhile in silence.

His face grew hard while he looked, and once or twice his hands shut madly, but he said nothing.

There was a tiger at the heart of this man.

Supposed to be dead by some people, and occupying a little room in the heart of tougher New York, he was comparatively safe from his enemies; but he had revealed himself that very night to at least one of them.

Major Bullion knew that he was not dead.

The man who lived like a prince and fared like a king, with money enough to keep up this state, had not only seen him, but had struggled for his life with this same man; but the strange one had come off conqueror, inasmuch as he had recaptured the black box, even though it was empty.

After awhile the man got up and carried the box behind a curtain, from which seclusion he suddenly emerged with the box out of sight.

"I must make a second play. I see that," said he. "The girl is dead—the whole city knows that, and the Coop, my old nest, has a mystery which seems to puzzle these slick foxes of the human trail. Let it mystify them. What need I care? I am still Sau. Tarsus, the man with the great secret which they want along with the treasure. What's become of Old Oliver? Dare I go out and look for the old diamond-maker? Would I find him if I went? He may have taken the hint and left the nest in the Coop—he and Coral. If so I might have a long look for them, but I would like to see the old man—to stand once more before him and say just a word or two."

He laughed at the end of the last sentence, and proceeded to don a disguise which changed his looks.

"Mother Bluebottle, I believe, told me that the nest was empty—that Oliver and Coral have vanished, but she didn't venture a guess as to where they might be found."

He went to the door and looked out.

"Jupiter won't be looking for me yet," he went on. "If he has come back to his master he knows that I have been after the

box, and he will play tiger once more—that is, if he can find me."

A minute later the man slipped from the room, carefully locking the door behind him, and thence down to the street.

"I would like to know what the little one thinks now," said he with another inward chuckle. "She came to the room and saw me lying on the floor, and I hadn't volition enough to let her know that a spark of life was left in my body. I've got a notion to look in upon Nappers. By Jove! I believe I will."

He turned up not long afterward in a hallway where he leaned against the wall to let a person come down-stairs.

This person turned out to be a boy, nimble and thin, with an old head upon his shoulders and a pair of keen eyes in his head.

It was Tommy Flyer.

Tarsus, as he was called, might have escaped the notice of eyes less sharp than Tommy's, but there was no escaping those of the boy.

Tommy stopped suddenly on the lower step, leaned toward the man against the wall and gave vent to an ejaculation of astonishment.

"Well, I'm done for if it ain't his ghost!" cried the boy.

He looked again, for despite the disguise which the man had assumed he knew him.

"What would Nappers say if she could see this?" continued Tommy. "She declares that she found him dead on the floor in the Coop; but here he is—a little changed, but the same cove all the same. It beats me all holler."

Tarsus could not keep back a smile at the boy's words and actions.

He knew that he had been discovered and that it would be useless to attempt to creep out of it, so he stepped forward and wanted to know what Mr. Flyer intended to do about it.

The boy drew back and looked up the staircase.

"I'd like for Nappers to see you," he said at last. "It would do her a world of good, and besides she would tell you about the note she was taking to you when she found you on the floor."

"What note?"

"The note from the woman."

Tarsus started toward the steps.

"Where is Nappers?" said he.

"Come, I'll show you. I'll go with you to her and perhaps I had best prepare her for your coming for she's nervous ever since that scare."

Tommy led the way up-stairs, but had the man at his heels, and presently he paused at a door and knocked.

"Come in," said a voice and Tommy threw wide the door.

At sight of the boy Miss Nappers uttered an exclamation of surprise, having but lately parted from him, but the next moment she caught sight of the man.

She stopped and looked at him and then turned to Tommy for an explanation.

"This is the dead man, Nappers," said Tommy. "This is the man who lived in the little room at the end of the hall."

"No, it isn't, Tommy, for, as I am alive this precious minute, I saw him dead that night on the floor."

"But he's living now to prove that you must have been mistaken. Look at him, Nappers. Can't you see that the eyes are the same and that one shoulder is a little stooped, as you often told me one of his was?"

At the same time Tarsus put up one hand and removed a part of his beard.

"I see! I see—the same man!" exclaimed Nappers. "This is the man I thought was dead."

"I thought you'd recognize him, Nappers. I found him in the lower hall."

Tarsus came forward and held out his hand.

"Shut the door, Tommy," said Miss Nappers.

Tommy obeyed and backed up against it.

"You were bringing me a note that night, eh?" asked Tarsus.

"I was. She wrote it and asked me to carry it to you."

"She?"

"Jericho Jen."

"You have it now, of course."

Tarsus put out his hand for the note, but Nappers with another startled look at Tommy drew back.

"I—I haven't it with me just now," she stammered. "You see, sir, after finding you as I did, and believing that I was gazing upon your dead body, I went back to Jennie, but her room was locked and I couldn't get to report."

"Locked, was it?" said the man, with a grin. "But what did you do with the note?"

"Sir," said Tommy Flyer, "she took such an interest in your case, believing that you was really dead and had been carried off by some one, that she gave it to the detective, thinking that it might prove a clue."

"Gave it to a detective?" cried Tarsus. "Did you really do that, Nappers?"

"I did, sir."

"To whom did you give it?"

"To Mr. Shook—Solon Shook, the best ferret of all of them," spoke Tommy. "He is now on the trail and I guess is completing 'the chain' as they call it."

"He took it away, of course?"

"He did."

"Did you read the note?"

Tarsus was looking Nappers squarely in the face, and the girl could not avoid his gaze.

She colored under his eye and for a moment turned her head away, but a strange magnetism seemed to bring her back.

"I read it," at last confessed Nappers. "You know how it was—a note from a woman who vanished, to a man supposed to be dead. I never heard anything like it."

"There never was anything like it," put in Tommy. "I don't know what Solon thought of the matter, but it seemed to puzzle him."

"What did the letter say? give me the substance of it as well as you can remember."

Nappers, after a moment's thought, did so.

The man listened attentively, and thanked her at the end of her information.

"So she warned me?" he said in an undertone which the two friends overheard. "So Jen told me what I have heard before—that they are after me. But she sent the letter too late."

He suddenly looked up and caught Nappers's eye.

"Was the door unfastened when you came?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. You know I couldn't have seen you on the floor if it had been locked."

"That's right. What time was it when you came, Nappers?"

"I can't tell to the minute, for the sight frightened me almost out of my wits, and the first thing I did was to run for Policeman Coovert."

"And when you came back I was gone, eh?"

"Yes, but the room was occupied."

"By the woman the newspapers have said so much about?"

"She was dead in the chair at the table."

Tarsus seemed to get white as he bent toward the girl and for a moment looked her in the face without speaking.

"That was Jen, wasn't it?" he asked.

"Don't you know—didn't you know it at the time—that the dead woman in my room was Jericho Jen?"

Nappers shook her head.

"I wasn't myself just then," she said. "I couldn't have recognized Mother Bluebottle, as you call her, if I had seen her in the woman's place."

"Very well, Nappers. We'll let that go. But it was Jen all the same."

"When did she go to the room and how was she killed?"

"Let that pass also. It was Jen and she was as dead as you thought me. Perhaps she wanted to follow up your note with some other information, but I never saw her."

Both Tommy Flyer and Miss Nappers opened their eyes at this.

"It is true. I suppose your smart detective will be hunting me down for the murder of Jen. Look here, Nappers. You're a good girl, ain't you?"

"I hope so."
 "And never lie?"
 "She never lies, sir," exclaimed Tommy, indignantly.
 "All right. Now, Nappers, tell me what you saw, if anything, when you passed from my room after finding yourself alone with Jen's corpse—you know you weren't there when Coovert came back, though he left you on guard."

Miss Nappers seemed to turn pale.
 "You never tell a lie, you say; now you want to tell the truth. What did you see as you slipped from the chamber? Tell me. You have kept it from Solon Shook, but you must not keep it from me."

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT NAPPERS SAW.

MISS NELLY NAPPERS found herself in a predicament.

She might have wondered how Saul Tarsus came to know that she had seen anything connected with the murder in the Coop; she might have wondered, too, how he knew where to find her, but it was too late now—he had discovered her and that was enough.

Nappers looked at Tommy Flyer who was engaged just at that time in looking, presumably at a print on the wall, but in reality that individual was trying to make up his mind just what should be done.

If Nappers had a secret connected with the events of that night Tommy believed that it should be kept for Solon Shook in whom he had a great deal of confidence, but here was a man trying to worm it from her, perhaps to Miss Nappers's undoing as well as his own.

He did not think this was right, but he dared not come out and say so.

"You saw something that night—something which for some reason you have kept to yourself," said Tarsus. "You must tell me, girl."

Must? That was a hard word for Nappers to hear and she appealed mutely to Tommy who did not speak.

"You came out of the room where you were set by Policeman Coovert to watch the body till he came back—you slipped away while on guard and you saw something."

"Who told you?"

"Never mind that!" answered the man half savagely. "I know what I'm talking about. Come, Nappers. I can't remain here till daylight."

Tommy thought the time had come for him to say something, therefore he turned and came forward:

"Let Nappers tell what she knows when they call upon her to testify in court."

"Silence!" almost thundered Tarsus. "I am the court and she will tell me now."

Master Flyer drew off and shut his fists, but he did not resent the command.

"You are not going to prove stubborn, Nappers?" continued Tarsus. "You will tell me the truth now since you are a girl of veracity according to Mr. Flyer."

"She never lies, Nappers don't."

"All right."

Once more the man leaned toward the girl and looked her squarely in the eye.

"I'll take it now. What did you see, Nappers?"

"Nothing very much."

"You think so."

"Indeed, it was what I suppose one can see nearly any night in the Coop."

"Something common, eh? Well?"

"You see, I didn't care to stay there with the dead, for I knew that when Mr. Tom came back with the sergeant I would be taken up as a witness, and that I didn't fancy."

"No? You didn't care about telling that you saw a dead man on the floor, went off for a few minutes, and came back to see a dead woman in his place."

"That's it exactly," replied Nappers, with a shudder.

"Perhaps I shouldn't blame you. But you saw, what?"

"I say it wasn't anything much."

"Come to the point, Nappers. Was it on the same floor?"

"No, sir; it was not."

"Oh, it was on the upper landing?"

"It was, indeed."
 "Was it a man?"
 "It was not."
 "A woman, then?"
 "It was a woman. It was Mother Bluebottle."

Tarsus seemed to give a slight whistle, and the next moment he was looking toward the door.

"On the next floor above, was she? Not on the same floor where she lives?"

"That's right."

"What was she doing?"

"She was leaning over the bannister looking down at me, as it were."

"Nothing more, Nappers?"

"She seemed to have something in her hand."

"What was it like?"

"I didn't stop to see, because I feared Mr. Tom would come back and intercept me."

"But you got a glimpse of it?"

"A sort o' glimpse."

"Well?"

"It looked to me like a strap."

"Mother Bluebottle was holding it in her hand, was she?"

"Yes; it dangled over the bannister, and it was black."

"Did she see you?"

"I don't know. At least, she remained there till I slipped away."

"I told you, sir, that Nappers never lies," said Tommy at this juncture.

"No, but it takes a good deal of screwing to get the truth from her sometimes," grinned Tarsus. "That's all, Nappers."

"But, look here. Are you going to tell Mother Bluebottle that I saw her that night?"

"You don't want me to tell her, eh?"

"I don't. I don't like Mother Bluebottle."

"Well, I won't give you away, Nappers; but you are sure it was Mother Bluebottle you saw?"

"I am. Why, she's not a midget, you know, and one couldn't miss seeing her if he looked up-stairs."

"That's all."

Tarsus picked up the hat he had deposited upon Nappers's table and rose to go.

"Let me ask a question," said Nappers.

"Of course. Turn about's fair play. Sail in, Nappers."

He had settled back in the chair again, and Tommy, delighted with Nelly's coolness, crossed his legs and waited impatiently.

"Of course I see now that you weren't dead that night. That's as plain as the nose on my face," began the girl. "When I saw you on the floor I thought you were as dead as Bonaparte; indeed, I went in and touched your face, but it must have been my scare that made it seem so cold."

"Perhaps," smiled Tarsus.

"But something happened to you that night, for you wouldn't have been lying on the floor that way for fun."

Tommy caught Nappers's eye at this moment and nodded his approval of her course. She was on the right track, and he wondered if she would succeed in her designs.

"Now, sir, who attacked you that night?"

It was a blunt question, and Tarsus started a little when it fell from the girl's tongue.

"How do you know I was attacked?"

"Oh, a chair was upset and the cloth had been half pulled from the table. Then there was an opening in the wall, but I shut that myself."

"That's clever. You must have stayed in the room some time."

"I can't tell how long, but I shut the little door in the wall. I noticed that the hole was empty, and the first thought that rushed through my head was that you had been robbed as well as murdered."

"You had cause to think that, but if I was plundered I was far from being murdered, Nappers."

"Yes, and I'm glad it is so. But you see you haven't answered me. I asked you who attacked you—who pulled the tablecloth away and who overturned the chair?"

"What if I should not care to answer all that, Nappers? I may have some secret which I do not care to let out."

"But Nappers told you all she knows," chimed in Tommy, coming to the girl's aid.

"She hasn't kept anything back, and if

you're in favor of fair play, and you ought to be, I think you should be as fair with Nappers."

Tarsus turned with a scowling countenance upon Tommy Flyer, but that person happened to be looking away again and did not get the benefit of it.

"Do you know who came in upon you that night?" persisted the girl.

"Perhaps I do."

"And you had a battle royal in the room and he carried off what you had concealed in the wall?"

"Do you think so, Nappers?" and the man leaned again toward Tommy's friend who seemed to think that her cross-examination was about to fail.

"Everything goes to prove it. The detective thought so."

"He did, eh?"

At this moment Nappers, who happened to catch Tommy's eye, was rewarded with a shake of the head, and she saw that bringing in the detective in that manner was not approved.

"What does this man—this ferret—think of what happened in the Coop?" continued Tarsus. "He thinks I was robbed, you say—that I had a tussle with some enemy that night? And pray what does he think of the death of Jericho Jen?"

"Laws! we never asked him to tell us what he thinks, did we, Tommy?"

"Never, sir. I never interferes with the detectives, and I don't consider it my business to try to pry into their secrets."

Thus repulsed, Tarsus did not return to the charge but slightly changed the subject.

"This man is a good one and he intends to solve the mystery of the Coop, I believe?"

"He will if he can."

"I hope he will. He is a shrewd one, I hear."

"When you get ahead of Solon Shook you want to remain up all night planning for the next day," enthusiastically remarked Tommy. "You can't do it, sir."

"That's encouraging. I will do all in my power to assist him. I may be able to furnish a link or two."

"Wish you would. You see Nappers and he are interested in this matter—not that we were acquaintances of Jen's—but because Nappers happens to be mixed up in the finding of the body."

"I'll see both of you later on," and Tarsus went to the door. "Oh, I forgot: You haven't been back to the place since, eh, miss?"

Nappers shook her head.

"Nor seen Mother Bluebottle since?"

Another shake.

"What about the old man and the girl who live on the sky-floor? You know them, Nappers?"

Tommy held up a warning finger which Tarsus did not see, and Nappers replied:

"I never enjoyed any acquaintance with them. You mean the diamond-maker and the daughter?"

"Oliver Onyx and Coral."

"Oh, I knew such people lived near the roof of the Coop, but that was all."

Tarsus left the pair alone, and the moment the door shut Tommy Flyer sprang to Nappers's side and seized her hand.

"You did admirably," cried he. "By Johoke! you have a head of worth on your shoulders, but I never heard you say anything about the woman who leaned over the bannisters. You never told Solon, did you?"

"I never did."

"You must tell him. He must know all about that. It may be a clue. That man wasn't dead after all, Nappers. He's the liveliest corpse I ever saw, and some one's going to suffer for his living, too. Mebbe it'll be the person who came in upon him that night. But I'll see Solon and tell him about the woman and the strap."

"Wait, Tommy," advised the girl. "Don't be too fast. I'll see him myself. I didn't tell that man all I saw that night. The rest I'll tell Solon Shook when I see him."

"Nappers, you're a trump!" exclaimed the boy, falling back. "You'd be worth your weight in gold if you were as big as Mother Bluebottle. You're a reg'lar Koohinoor, you are."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CLUE-FINDER HEARS NAPPERS'S SECRET.

"KOOHINOOR or not," said Nappers with a smile, "I know what I know, and I didn't see fit to tell that man all."

It was again agreed by both Tommy and the girl that the latter should reveal everything to Solon Shook, and the boy volunteered to go at once and hunt the ferret.

"I would rather see him here than elsewhere," remarked Nappers, "for to go out on the street is to risk being seen, and that fellow may be on the alert."

"I didn't like him nohow, for somehow-or-other I couldn't get it out of my head, Nappers, that you thought you saw him dead on the floor. It sent over me a sort of creepy feeling, which I feel even now, though, of course, he's not dead."

Tommy set out to find the detective, and having been provided with Solon's address in case he was needed, he soon turned up at the ferret's door.

In response to the boy's rap he was bade come in, and the next moment he stood face to face with Solon Shook.

The detective was alone, having just come in, and was ready to listen to Tommy's errand.

"What do you think Nappers knows?" asked Solon, but the boy shook his head.

"She must 'ave seen something more than she lets on in the Coop that night," said he. "I am Nappers's right bower, you see, but she doesn't see fit to tell me everything, and I guess that's about right."

Solon got ready and went back with Mr. Flyer.

They found Nappers awaiting them and ready to see the famous ferret.

"Tommy told you all about that man's coming to see me?" she said.

"Yes. I know all about that. You say you want to tell me something."

"I guess I'd better tell it, though, really, I don't like to."

"Have it out as soon as you can; that's the best way with an achin' tooth and p'raps it's also the best with a secret."

It was Tommy who ventured this sage advice and Nappers looked at him and smiled approval.

"Shall I remain?" asked the boy, picking up his hat. "It may be a secret for but two and in that case I'm not needed here."

"I would be pleased to have you go, Tommy. In course of time you know—"

"Of course, of course," broke in the boy. "I don't care to be the custodian of any secrets myself as they're dangerous things to carry," and with this he whisked from the room, leaving Nappers alone with the detective.

For a little while the girl seemed displeased at herself for sending for the shadower, but all at once she leaned toward him and said:

"It seems so strange—my story does, that sometimes I think it was all a dream. You remember I went to the house with a letter from Jen to the man in the end-room?"

"You have told me this and have given me in proof the very letter."

"Yes, yes. Well, I never got to deliver it, for I thought the man lay dead on the floor and I went back with the note. But before I did this I roused Mr. Coovert, the policeman, whom I found standing in a doorway for shelter from the storm. We went up to the room together and found the woman there instead of the man. It was all so startling that I could hardly come to believe it at all."

"When Policeman Tom went down to send for the patrol I was left in the room to watch till he came back. It was a shaky job, I tell you, Mr. Shook—to be cooped up in that old house with a dead woman in a chair—'murdered by some person or persons unknown' as the coroner's jury has declared. It made me creepy all over and finally became more than I could stand."

"You became nervous, Nappers."

"Sort o' that way," was the response as the girl took a long breath. "It was enough to make creepy feelings run up and down your spine. Never give me such another job if you please. Well, I remained there a few minutes—they seemed hours to me—and at last I resolved to give Mr. Coovert the shake."

"I was about to quit the room—indeed, I had gone to the door—when I heard some one in the corridor outside. At first I thought it might be a mistake, but the next minute the knob turned and the door slowly opened."

"And some one came in?"

"Wait. You'll get all of it in a minute, Mr. Shook. There was a lot of clothes belonging to him hanging behind the door, and I just got into them and waited. Presently the door opened a little further and I saw who was in the room. It wasn't Mother Bluebottle; no, it wasn't that mountain of flesh, and I don't like to tell who it was."

Nappers looked away and her lips met firmly behind her last words, and the detective saw that she regretted having sent for him.

"Won't you let me stop right here and keep the rest to myself?" she asked him.

"It might not be best."

"Not the best for what?"

"For the cause of justice. You know that that poor woman was murdered in that room."

"So they say."

"There's abundant proof that she was," continued the detective. "She was deliberately strangled."

"They say that, too—strangled in the chair p'raps. It was awful, Mr. Shook, and here I am about to give you the awfulest clue you ever had."

Solon Shook did not reply to this, but waited for the girl to proceed as he believed she would in a few seconds.

"It was the girl that I saw enter the room."

"The girl?" exclaimed Shook.

"Yes, don't you know? the old diamond-maker's daughter what lived next the roof in the Coop."

"Coral?"

"That's what they call her. It was her and not Mother Bluebottle who slipped into the room."

"Well?"

"Her face was as white as snow and she stopped in the middle of the room a moment and then slipped over to where the dead creature was."

"She did not see you, Nappers?"

"Not at all. I stood among the old clothes with my heart in my throat waiting for her to give me a chance to slip out of the room which I was very willin' to do."

"What did the child do?"

"The child?" exclaimed Nappers, drawing back. "Why, she's older than I be and she keeps company. I've seen him."

"Girls have beaux very young now," smiled Solon Shook. "She may be seventeen."

"That she is if a day. What did she do? The funniest thing in the world."

"Well?"

"She went over to see the dead one in the chair and bent over her. I declare that she kissed her, actually kissed that murdered woman, for all the time I was watchin' her and I saw her do it."

"Coral kissed Jen did she?"

"Right smartly at that. It was so unexpected to me that I nearly let slip a cry. Then she turned round and seemed to take in the room. She looked everywhere and at last began to rummage through the drawers as if she was looking for something that ought to have been in that room."

"What did she find?"

"Nothing but a little black pocketbook which she fished from the depths of one of drawers and this she hid in her bosom."

"After that what did the girl do?"

"Why, she went back to the dead woman. She raised her head and bent closer than ever. For half a minute she seemed to be looking at her throat where you know the marks were, and all at once she broke away with a cry and seemed to tremble in the middle of the chamber."

"As if she had just seen them, Nappers?"

"I don't know. I wanted to get out of the room so badly that by this time I was watchin' for nothing but a chance to get away. But I had to stay till Coral went out. She fell back to the door at last, but stopped there. I could have touched her almost from my hiding-place, but I dared not."

"That would not have been policy."

"I thought of that. At last much to my relief she opened the door and crept from the room; I heard her feet in the hallway and then a voice."

"A voice, Nappers?"

"Yes, it sounded like Mother Bluebottle's and said: 'Did you find it, child?'"

"Could it have been the old woman's voice?" asked the detective.

"I don't know, but it sounded like it. I've heard her voice, you know, but what would she be doing asking the girl such a question as that when she could have come and looked for herself?"

"That's true," remarked the ferret. "What did you do then?"

"I thought how much time I had wasted, and eager to quit the place, I resolved to get away, which I did."

"You left the room then?"

"I did. In the hall outside, as I went to the stairs, I looked up and saw Mother Bluebottle on the other floor."

"Which is not the one on which she lives?"

"No, it is the next one up."

Solon Shook nodded.

"She was standing at the bannister of the landing looking down as it were, and she seemed to hold a strap in her hands."

"That is what I really saw in the old house that night. I have told you what I did not tell the man who called awhile ago. It is a strange story, I know, and I hope the girl isn't mixed up in the dark crime which you are running down. But why did she come into that room at that time, and why did she kiss the dead woman in the chair? It's a great puzzle to me, Mr. Shook, and it's for you to make it out, if you are man enough."

Nelly Nappers ceased and seemed to feel relieved that she had at last told all.

"I will call Tommy in now," said she.

"He's sitting on the stair-case, no doubt, and is ready to come back, though I don't care to have him know what I saw—not just yet, at any rate."

Nappers sprang up and ran to the door where she called Tommy Flyer several times without getting a response."

"He's gone—slipped away, I guess, because he wasn't admitted to the secret. He's a queer one, Tommy is, as I've discovered more than once; but he'll come round all right."

Nappers had scarcely ceased when the door opened and the boy made his appearance.

"I've been playing spy myself a little!" he exclaimed, his eyes aglow.

"Where, Tommy?"

"On the steps and down on the street. A man came half way up here and then went back."

"The one who was here awhile ago?" asked Nappers. "Mebbe he wanted to ask some more questions."

"It wasn't that man," replied Tommy.

"It wasn't him at all, for I got a fair look at him in the light of the lamp, and it wasn't him by a jug full."

"Who then?"

"Why, it was the man we saw in the Park the other night—the one who tore his glove and threw it into the pond."

Nappers gave vent to a little exclamation of surprise and then opened a drawer at her left hand.

"This is the glove, Mr. Shook. The man looked like a dude; he was well dressed, and put on a good deal of style. Tommy fished the glove from the water, and I brought it home for good luck. You see there's a name inside, but we haven't been able to make it out fully."

Solon Shook took the glove, a soft lavender affair, ripped a little on the back and showing that it had been in the water. He leaned toward the light with it in his hand and caught sight of some writing on the inside near the wrist end.

In another moment the detective had taken from his pocket a folding magnifier which he opened.

"We hadn't anything of that kind to look at the letters," cried Nappers. "We had nothing but our eyes and for once they didn't give us the cue."

The detective examined the marks a few moments and then raised his head.

"What name is it?" asked Tommy and Nappers in the same breath.

"As near as I can make out, it is simply 'Spiders.'"

"Jehul Spiders?" vociferated the boy. "Spiders for sure, Mr. Shook? Why, that's a name I'm onto."

"You are, Tommy?"

"In a certain way. But what brought that man here to-night? He's no lover of yours, Nappers?"

"A lover of mine? Come, Tommy Flyer; you'll get yourself into trouble makin' such accusations ag'in' me. Spiders, eh? Wait! No, I guess I don't know him."

Solon Shook looked at the glove again and turned to Tommy Flyer.

"Which way did the man go?"

"I followed him to the corner, which he turned, and around it he vanished."

"Was he well dressed?"

"Yes, as he always is. He might have been looking for you, Mr. Shook."

"Hardly for me," and the detective smiled. "What would a man like Spiders be looking around here for if not for me?" and both Tommy and Nappers saw that the detective was puzzled over what the former had seen.

Parry Spiders was looking for some one.

CHAPTER XVII.

PRETTY CLOSE QUARTERS.

SOLON SHOOK was now desirous of finding the old diamond-maker and his daughter, not that he thought either had had a hand in the murder in the Coop, but because they seemed to be mixed up in the mystery.

He had no reason to doubt the story confided to him by Miss Nappers; she had apparently told just what she had seen and nothing more, and it had puzzled him.

Then, the appearance of Spiders in the building while Nelly was telling her story was another source of interest for the detective, and seemed to call for investigation.

He had already, as the reader knows, tracked Spiders from Major Bullion's house to Mother Bluebottle's room, and had heard a very interesting conversation by stationing himself at the door.

Solon left Nappers's home with singular feelings.

He seemed as far from the real solution of the mystery as ever, and here was another complication.

Mother Bluebottle appeared to be the custodian of a secret connected with Jericho Jen's death, and, from what Nappers had told him, Coral Onyx might know something about the same thing.

The next day bright and early Solon went to look at the house from which he had tracked Spiders to Mother Bluebottle's.

Perhaps he had a desire to see it by daylight, and when he had noticed it he selected a secluded place from which he could watch it awhile.

He would liked to have entered it and taken a good look beyond its door, but he was not permitted to do so and had to content himself with outside observation.

It was to this house that he had tracked the man with the knife, and he had seen both Jupiter Junk and Spiders enter it, but after the stranger's sudden exit.

There must be some other man behind the scenes, some one with whom he had not dealt yet in the game, and Solon wanted to see this person.

Jupiter Junk was but the tool of this unseen person and Spiders little more than a companion, or fellow trickster, and there was no doubt in the detective's mind that this unseen one was in some manner connected with the tragedy of the Coop.

He was engaged in watching the house when the door opened and a man came forth.

Solon saw at a glance that it was neither Spiders nor Jupiter.

He was a well-built man, a little stout, well-dressed, with an iron-gray beard and a quick step.

He might have been fifty—perhaps a little under that, but at any rate he was worth studying.

Was this the head of the game? Was this man Jupiter's master and Spiders's friend.

The morning was bright and pleasant, a good one for a stroll, and when the man started off Solon followed, but at a respectful distance.

The ferret was led half a dozen squares before his quarry pretended to pause at all, and at last he took a seat on a bench in one of the numerous Park-Squares that dot the great metropolis.

It was not a very warm morning, not a very good one to be out in a Park where the wind blew freely, but this man did not seem to care for a little breeze.

Solon drew off a short distance and fell to watching him with a ferret's keenness.

He now had ample time in which to study the man in the Park—a splendid opportunity to see more of him, and even to note some peculiarities he had not seen before.

He noticed that, while he had American ways, he looked a little like a foreigner, but that may have come from a residence abroad, and in the end the detective decided that he was American despite his manners.

The man on the bench had a darkish face and his eyes were restless and black.

His hands were scrupulously gloved and one played ceaselessly with a cane which he had brought out in his ramble.

Was he waiting for some one to meet him in the Park? Had he come to the spot to have a private interview with some person who was a little behind time?

At the end of half an hour the one so well watched caught sight of some one whom he wanted to see, for he made a slight motion with the cane and was joined by a person who slouched forward with a certain hang-dog gait and nodded when he came alongside.

It was Jupiter Junk.

Solon Shook knew the man he had followed from the Morgue to the restaurant and thence to the house from which the Park sitter had emerged.

But he was not quite near enough to overhear what might pass between the pair.

Solon felt that after all he was likely to be baffled in this particular, but he resolved to make an effort to catch a few words at least.

He was baffled again, for all at once both men rose and sauntered away, Jupiter talking incessantly but in low tones as they left the Park.

Ten minutes later the pair entered a little drinking place where there were private stalls for private parties and after a five minutes' wait Solon went in, too.

No one, not even Tommy Flyer, would have recognized the detective in his present make-up, he looked so unlike himself, and the sharp eye of Junk himself would have had to look twice to determine who the ferret was.

In the saloon Solon seemed to meet with another obstacle, for he saw nothing of the couple and did not know which particular stall they had taken possession of.

From one suddenly came a sound of female laughter and he knew they were not there, and from another proceeded a coarse song which told him not to look for Jupiter and his friend in that one, so of the two left he resolved to take the next one to the end stall provided it was empty.

He argued that the pair would take the one most removed from those already occupied and he was right, for no sooner had he closed the little door than he heard a voice beyond the partition.

This partition did not extend to the ceiling, but was just too high for a tall man to look over it into the opposite stall and Solon ordered a mild drink while he listened.

It was a ticklish business for the detective, but the end might justify the means, and he was used to taking desperate chances with desperate men.

At first he could not distinguish any words from the other side of the partition, but at last he heard several.

He leaned against the wall and held his breath.

"Don't I know what Spiders will do if you give him enough rope? He'll hang both of us."

"I hardly think so. It's the old grudge between you two men, and if you could compromise—"

"But we can't. I won't, there!"

"Listen to reason, Jupiter—"

"Don't 'Jupiter' me here, major. You know that walls have ears, and we might have had more seclusion in the Park, but,

hang it all, there are eyes outside while there are none here."

"Just so. I don't ask you to throw your arms around Spiders's neck, fall upon it and weep. I know the grudge too well to ask that; but we must stick together, you know."

"Better you and I than all three."

"But Spiders knows, and that's where the danger lies."

"I know that. He knows and he's getting too high up for me. I don't propose to stand it much longer, and I'll proceed to trim the feathers of the Sing Sing bird—"

"Don't get boisterous. You are a dead stand-off when it comes to records."

"Mebbe we are, but see here, major: I wasn't sent up for the cowardly crime that got him the stripes."

"I know that."

"I didn't sneak into a lone woman's house one night, rob and strangle the poor soul. It wasn't his fault that he left a spark of life in her body, the cowardly cur."

"Perhaps not, but what would we have done without Spiders's tip?"

"Of course. He happened to find out where the gems were, and now he wants every one to think that but for him we wouldn't have what we've got. You know what scheme he's got in his head now?"

"What is it?"

"Even now he is looking for the couple that left the Coop—for Old Onyx and the girl. He intends to play a hand of his own, and if he succeeds what will he care for us?"

"You don't mean that, Ju—I mean Tom?"

"Mean it? Of course I do. He is after them now, and he will try to discover them by tracking the young man who is Coral's lover."

"It's a good plan, and worthy the brain that conceived it."

"Yes. Well, if he finds them he will play out his new hand, then farewell to our hopes of final success. I have Mother Bluebottle under my thumb; I can find what's become of the man I thought I had finished that night in the Coop—I can do all this, I say, major; but here comes in a new tripper."

"How so?"

"Right here the detective drops into the game. That is the stumbling-block. This man who, by the way, is one of the coolest-headed of his class—Solon Shook, of the private Agency of Sharp & Naball—is now on the trail, and I'm afraid he has already picked up one or two clues."

"What are we to do?"

"Stop that man!" these words were spoken in a half hiss. "Stop him, that's what."

"I think so, but you know I can't take care of a man like that. I might overcome him if face to face, but to watch him—to track him, perhaps—that's something I'm not used to."

"You never take care of your enemies in that manner, major; I know that," a slight laugh. "You are not fitted to play tiger when you play serpent, ha, ha!"

"I must leave this man to you and Spiders."

"To me alone or to no one," was the answer. "Spiders doesn't mix in with my play at all. I won't have it. Some time I must settle with that rascal for old acts, but I'll postpone the day of reckoning at your say-so, major."

"Do it, but—"

Just here the detective in moving his position a mite knocked his glass from the table, and it was shattered in a thousand pieces on the floor.

"What's that? There's some one in the next stall," cried the major's voice.

"Woe to him if he's a spy! Better for him if he had never seen the light of day. I'll take a peep at him."

Solon Sheek heard a chair move, and the next moment he was sprawling over the table with all the senseless abandon of a drunken man.

He caught a glimpse of the head that appeared above the top of the partition which separated the two stalls, and saw the dark eyes that regarded him.

Upon a chair stood Jupiter Junk, and for three full minutes he looked down upon the suspected man, while his companion watched him with breathless interest.

Jupiter did not let anything escape him. He took note of the broken glass and the exact position of the body in the little stall,

and at last dropped down with a twinkle in his eyes.

He made a motion to the major who was about to speak, and suddenly straightened again and subjected the detective to another scrutiny.

But Solon, suspecting something of the kind, had not moved a peg, and Jupiter smiled when he noticed this.

"I guess he's all right," said he, dropping back to his companion. "He's dead drunk and oblivious to all that passes around him."

"But the noise?"

"Oh, he brushed his glass from the table, and there's an extra quarter for the bar when he comes back to life. But I guess we're through here."

"So far as I'm concerned we are. You know what's to be done?"

"I'm to take care of this track watcher, eh? All right. I'm to stop the man on the trail—the cunning clue-finder who is to perish with his clues unraveled. All O. K. You can trust me; but that man Spiders—the Sing Sing lark—you will do well if you let him go."

"But we can't do that now. You say he is looking for Oliver Onyx and the girl? What will Mother Bluebottle do for him?"

"Nothing if I get to see her. Nothing if I can put a bug into her ear."

"Do that, too."

"I will; I'll do it soon, and then I'll show this detective that a fox as cunning as ever a fox was is after him, and that a hand as soft as silk, but as deadly as a thug's, is close upon him. Oh, I'm getting back into my element again, major. I'll have to have another raise in a day or so."

"You have but to ask. You know that. I have the gems and the tiger got the empty box back."

They quitted the stall and after waiting awhile in the one he occupied Solon Shook walked out to see nothing of the pair, and to breathe again the pure atmosphere of the cool morning.

He had been repaid for his trouble and risk; he knew that an enemy, sworn to kill, had taken the trail against him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE EDGE OF A SECRET.

"WHY not see what the man tiger will tell me?" thought Solon Shook after his last adventure. "Why not go to him and see if he can be made to divulge any of his secrets? He may not be willing to tell any thing at all, but not much time will be lost if I am unsuccessful. I will go."

Solon knew where Paul Tarsus lodged for he had tracked Mother Bluebottle to the house and he proceeded in that direction.

Jupiter Junk, sworn to hunt him down and rid the trail of the cunning clue-finder, would not go to work for a little while and therefore he would have some time in which to interview the man-tiger as he playfully called him.

Solon knocked at Tarsus' door to find no one at home as it seemed, but all at once a noise beyond the portal reached his ears and he did not go away.

In another minute the door was slowly opened and there stood before him the man he had come to see.

The room beyond the man-tiger was pretty dark and the detective saw but little of the furniture as it was grouped here and there, and when he had crossed the threshold he saw that Tarsus lodged better than he thought.

Saul Tarsus eyed the detective suspiciously as he held the door open and let him in.

Did he recognize in the slight disguise Solon wore the man of clues and the tireless hunter of dark secrets in Gotham?

In the middle of the room he turned and faced the ferret, who had stopped and was looking at him closely.

"Don't be backward," said the man-tiger. "You have come to see me, therefore make the best of the situation while I doff my coat."

He threw his coat across a chair, and in his shirt sleeves, a change which showed his form to advantage and told the detective that he was almost an athlete, he announced himself ready to listen to his visitor.

"You may not know me?" began Solon, whereupon Tarsus put out his hand and smiled.

"I have so few callers that I know them all," said he. "You are the detective."

Solon Shook looked again at the man as if he was gifted with some magic powers, but he did not deny the accusation.

"What if I am the detective? Am I the less welcome on that account?"

"Well, not if you are welcome at all."

"Then I may be an intruder."

"Men of your stamp generally are, you know. They are so seldom welcome among those who don't keep within the pale of the law that their visits are not wanted."

The speaker did not appear vexed at Solon's call; he only seemed a little put out that he had made it at that particular time, as if it interfered with something he had in view.

"You are the man who until lately lived in the Coop?" continued Solon.

"There's no need denying that, seeing who you are. I am that man."

"You were not dead when the little thing found you on the floor?"

"Nappers?" he said with another smile.

"If I was dead then, I wouldn't be here answering you, eh?"

"Of course not."

"Then let's say that Nappers was mistaken for once. Tarsus was not dead, but he had received a severe handling."

Solon looked at him but said nothing.

"You seem to think that it takes a man to handle me," he went on. "Well, ordinarily it does. I have some strength of wind and muscle, but that night I was slipped up on and overpowered."

"An old enemy, then?"

"Not so much an old enemy as a determined one."

"I see. You say you were slipped up on. Would you mind telling me by whom and why? I may be of service to you."

For a moment the face of Saul Tarsus seemed to become white, then suddenly it came toward the detective and did not stop until it was quite close.

"Why should I tell you—a detective?" he said. "If you will answer that I may go on."

He leaned back in his chair and waited for the ferret's reply. He watched Solon Shook, evidently wondering what he would say, and for a minute not a word was heard in the room.

"If you will confide in me, I will clear up the mystery that hangs over the death of your friend, Jericho Jen."

"You will, eh?"

"I will bring the guilty to light. I will take up all the threads of the tangled skein, and will see that justice is done."

"That's clever," with a faint smile at the lips. "Just as if I couldn't devote a little time to that particular object myself. As I have just said, you're clever, Solon Shook."

Solon was not surprised to hear the man call his name. Why not? It was a name well known in the city, and especially to the criminal classes.

"You don't want the mystery solved, then?"

"I haven't said that. What if the trail should lead in my direction?"

"I don't think it will do that. Why should you take the girl's life? She had warned you, but Nappers was not permitted to deliver the warning."

"Because I was supposed to be dead on the floor. It was a curious case. I saw the girl in the room, but I hadn't power enough to let her know that I wasn't dead. I saw her go away, even heard her footsteps on the stairs, and when I came back to life, as it were, she was out of sight."

"You left the room then yourself."

"I did. Something impelled me downstairs and out into the night. I must have missed Jen by a hair from all I can find out. I didn't go back to the room, but Nappers and the policeman came and found the woman in my chair, dead."

"It's a strange case," observed Solon.

"It has interested all who have had anything to do with it. I fancy that it mystifies the gang."

"You mean the major and his men?"

Tarsus started.

"I see! you haven't been idle. You have

picked up a link here and a clue there. The major and his men! Ah, you know something about them."

"Something," echoed the detective.

"They want what you've got."

"Curse them, they've got what I had!" snarled the man. "Then, you see, they wanted my life, but they failed to take that."

"And when you went to see the major you failed in your object?"

"You know that, do you?" and Tarsus broke into a laugh. "You know that I came away with but the empty box when I thought I had the Tarsian gems."

Solon nodded.

"It was all my fault. I should have looked at the box before I left him. I might have known that the casket was empty, but fool that I am, I never looked till I got home."

"There is where you missed it, I see."

"Of course. The box seemed just as heavy as when it held the gems, and I thought I was carrying off the million in sparklers—such jewels as few people see nowadays."

"Jupiter robbed you of them and you thought you were getting even by robbing the major."

"Just so. But I didn't get them. He had stripped the casket and I carried off the empty nest—that's all."

"You might have been more careful if you had got Jen's warning. That is, you would have been on the alert."

"Perhaps. But they had it in for me. What do you think of a man being watched for nine months by a gang of slick men who want a million in diamonds—better gems than Oliver Onyx ever turned out in his little laboratory."

"The Tarsian gems you call them, I believe."

"Yes. You want the whole story, I see. You are here to pump me. That's your business, and I don't know that I ought to let you into the secret. But, why not? Would you tell me if you were in my place, and I were Solon Shook, the clue-finder?"

"If I wanted to avenge the death of a friend and thought the telling of the secret would help do it, yes."

"That's your way of looking at it, eh? Perhaps you're right, Solon. What have I to gain anyhow and what will I lose?"

He got up and paced the floor like a person laboring under strange excitement, and the detective watched him narrowly, saying nothing while he walked from door to window and back again like a caged and restless panther.

"You won't give it up till you know all anyhow," he suddenly said, stopping in front of the shadower and looking him full in the face. "I have heard a good deal about you. I know some of your work for I have lived here a long time, but not always in the Coop."

"I know that."

"So you've been looking after me a bit?" and he laughed again, coming back to his chair and resuming his seat. "Confound it all, it's war to the knife anyhow, and I've not got many years ahead of me. You shall hear my story."

Solon Shook did not show his delight by word or look.

He felt that he had achieved a victory and was content to let the man-tiger have his own way. To speak up and thank him for what he had just promised might ruin it all, therefore he remained silent and waited.

"But first let me show you something," said Tarsus, reaching toward a drawer which he unlocked and pulled out. "It may not be very much in your eyes, but it's something in mine."

He undid the package which he had taken from the drawer and revealed a little packet inside which he opened in turn and spread out a chamois skin upon which sparkled one lone diamond.

"Look at that," said he glancing up at the detective who moved his chair nearer the table and looked at the sparkling object.

It was a diamond of the first water, nearly as large as a large pea and beautifully shaped.

"Not from Old Oliver's crucible you may depend upon it," said Tarsus. "He can make gems, real diamonds, but none like this

one. He's a wonderful man, but he never made anything like this stone."

"It's a beauty," said Solon.

"One of the lot which they didn't get," was the response. "It belonged to the circlet and it once graced the throat of a queen. Of a queen! You look at me incredulously, Solon Shook, but it is true."

"I doubt nothing, but to see a queen's diamond upon your table naturally astonishes one."

"Yes, but we won't talk about the queen to-night—some other time, perhaps, when you are at the end of the trail and the cards are all played out. But I am torturing you."

He did not return the diamond to the box from which he had taken it, but let it lie on the soft skin while he proceeded.

"I am called Saul Tarsus. I am a man-tiger which you may be aware of if you know that I raided the den of the lions and tried to get back the Tarsian gems."

"Twenty years ago I was not what I am to-night. I was poor as the wretch who shivers on the street, or the suicide you find in the river."

"I didn't know Jericho Jen then nor was I hunted by the circle armed to the teeth and ready to strangle all who stand in their way. There was some sunlight upon my path and, though a wretch, I was comparatively happy."

"I came from the slime of a great city. I was a bat among the bats of a dark retreat where we seldom saw the sun; but I brought into the gloom of that place before I left it the glitter of the Tarsian gems."

The man stopped and picked up the diamond. He held it between him and the light and seemed to gloat over its possession.

"Hark! some one's at the door," he suddenly cried, leaping up and bounding across the room. "Didn't you hear some one out there? You see they want me still, though I haven't a tithe of what I once held in my keeping."

He stopped at the door like a wild beast and while he leaned toward it he drew a knife whose shining blade reposed along his sleeve.

The person outside was in the shadow of death.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE STORY OF THE TARSIAN GEMS.

THE clue-finder watched that door as he had not watched a portal for some time.

Tarsus did not stir, but stood at the portal with his hand drawn back and the ebony handle of the long-bladed knife in it. It meant death to the person who seemed about to turn the knob and enter.

Presently, the knob was turned slowly, almost noiselessly, and Solon Shook held his breath.

As the door opened, Tarsus fell back and broke into a smile, his dark face relaxing and his eyes softening into a queer twinkle.

Solon saw in the doorway the Amazonian figure of Mother Bluebottle.

"Oh, come in," said Tarsus, looking at her while she hesitated, having caught sight of the detective at the table. "I'm not alone, but my friend here won't hurt you."

She looked again and then came in, her titanic figure looming up in the light and her face red as if suddenly flushed.

Tarsus shut the door and followed her toward the table.

"This is the clue-finder," said he, waving his hand toward Solon. "This is the ferret who is on the trail and you may be able to give him a new link."

"A new link, is it?" and Mother Bluebottle looked at the detective, hardly knowing whether to take Tarsus in earnest or in jest. "What can I tell this man that he doesn't know already?"

"Not much; that's a fact," answered Tarsus. "His business is to find these things out, and he seems to be coming on very well so far. You know he is after the hand that killed Jen in my room at the Coop, and—"

Mother Bluebottle gave vent to a smart cry and seemed to wish herself outside the chamber.

"I was just starting in on a little narrative for his benefit," resumed Saul. "I was at the beginning when I heard you at the door, and as you didn't step with your usual

gazelle agility," here he smiled, "I went to the door with a little piece of steel in my hand—you know, Mother Bluebottle."

The giantess nodded, and Solon put in: "It's lucky for you that my friend didn't find an enemy at the door. As he was saying, he was about to spin a story for me, but I don't know what he will do with it now."

"She can listen, too," was the reply. "Sit down, Mother Bluebottle, if the chair will hold you, and I'll proceed."

The tenant of the Coop took a seat, wondering what sort of a yarn Tarsus could be spinning for the clue-finder, and nodded to Saul to resume.

"Let me see. Where was I? Oh, yes; I was saying that I wasn't very rich when I first met Jen. That's true. I was as poor as a shivering wretch on the streets. I hadn't a diamond then. They came later on with their curses."

Mother Bluebottle started a little, as these words gave her the first inkling of the trend of Tarsus's story, and she looked at him, but said nothing.

"It was this way: I had been abroad, and when I came back, roughing it across the Atlantic, I was approached by a man who wanted to know if I cared to make a ten-strike. Of course, I was ready for anything, and he took me into his confidence, and told me about a woman who long ago was a queen of some country, but who had been banished. I didn't know what to make of the rigmarole, it was such a strange story, but he offered to prove it all to me."

"He said that during her banishment she concluded to reach this country, and with all her jewels, a great many. It was in the old days of the pirates, when the ocean was the hunting-ground for a legion of freebooters, with Captain Kidd at their head, and with others of the same ilk to help him. They robbed every one on the high seas, and never spared any one, not even the fair women who fell into their hands. They wouldn't have been led into mercy by Mother Bluebottle's beauty there, but they would have flayed her alive and made her walk the plank besides."

Tarsus said this with a grin and a wink at the detective, and the face of the Amazon turned white a full moment.

"The vessel in which the deposed queen embarked was never heard from; at least it never reached its destination. Captain Kidd or some other gentleman of the times came across it, and made it his prize. Of course, the lady and her suite fell an easy prey to the rascals, and the gems, the crown jewels, or such of them as she was permitted to get away with, fell into the freebooter's hands, and the last seen of the vessel, so tradition goes, was a fiery mass in mid-ocean."

"That was long ago, but somehow or other my friend came into possession of the narrative, and I used to think that he was a descendant of this same pirate, from the knowledge he had of things. It was singular that he should select me to help him find the hidden gems, but perhaps he read in me something of my reckless, dare-devil nature, and thought that I was ready for anything that promised to fill my purse."

"He had possessed himself of an old chart which showed a long stretch of rocky coast, and with lines which crossed one another at odd places."

"I couldn't make head or tail out of the old thing, but he claimed that he had it all at his fingers' ends, and could go straight to the treasure. All he wanted was a companion strong of limb and absolutely fearless, and I seemed to fill the bill."

Tarsus at this juncture looked across at Mother Bluebottle, who seemed to have fallen into a doze in the chair, and with a smile at Solon Shook he resumed:

"We took vessel and went as near our destination as we could. It was a long trip, and we had to weather out some hard blows; but we gained the little cove marked 'M' in the chart and proceeded to verify it."

"Never was there seen such a wild and rocky coast. Sea-gulls screamed over the rocks, which were bare and bleak, just the place for a pirate's stronghold, and the proper spot for the concealment of treasure. Day after day we tried that chart in every way. I began to believe that my companion had been deceived by some clever rascal; but he persevered. At last we discovered a

buried stone, which gave me some hope, for it was covered with strange marks, and was placed where the chart said such a stone ought to be."

"Measuring from the stone over a pile of broken rocks, we found a little depression, where I was asked to dig with my pick. I fell to work at once, and, after half-an-hour's toil, I unearthed a skull almost decayed, and my companion went into ecstasies over the find. We were near the greatest find of the age, for ten minutes later my pick struck an iron box, which we pried out of its nest, and lo! when we broke it open, there lay before us in all their brilliancy the Tarsian gems."

Mother Bluebottle revived at this stage of the proceedings and opened her little eyes.

"The sight of the gems seemed to turn my companion into a madman. He looked at me with the glare of a fiend, and from that moment I knew I was not safe with him. Indeed, I began to wish I had never embarked upon such a treasure-hunt, and time proved that I was the companion of a mad fool."

"The night after finding the gems I was seized when not noticing my peril, and was carried to the edge of one of the beetling cliffs before I could lift a hand in self-defense."

"It was a struggle for life and death with a madman, and I resolved that he and not I should find a resting-place on the rocks below. In the storm that raged at the time we fought for the mastery on the slippery stones, and at last I freed myself, but at the expense of his life."

"You would have done the same, Solon Shook, and after the struggle ninety-nine men out of every hundred would have followed up the victory just as I did. I went back over the wet ground and took possession of the gems. I made away with the box, leaving him lying where he fell, got back to the little town from which we had set out for the coast, and afterward stole quietly from that region with the treasure in my hands."

"I drifted to this city after that. The secret was all my own. I was the richest man of my wretched circle, but I dared not show my riches. With the gems in my hands I resumed my old life, becoming a man with a secret which I durst not confide to any one."

"But you told me," put in Mother Bluebottle.

"I had to do that for you discovered it. You saw me one night looking at the jewels, showing them to Jericho Jen, and I had to tell you how I came by them."

The old woman smiled and shook her head at the detective.

"It was not long before I found that my secret was not safe. I discovered that I was watched, tracked from pillar to post, shadowed after dark and through the daytime. I was followed by a set of men who wanted what I had brought up from the Treasure Coast. It was a league for the gems—a mad cabal composed of at least four men who had sworn to get hold of the jewels at the expense of my life, and that of all others who came between them. I say the league was composed of four men, but there are but three now. The fourth one left the game suddenly, never matter when or how."

"That's what he did," grinned Mother Bluebottle. "He got tired of the hunt, didn't he, Saul?"

The man returned the smile, but his eyes flashed.

"He left the game anyhow," he said. "Jen knew the men. She was as shrewd as you find them; indeed, at one time they thought they had Jen in the cabal, but they crossed her and she turned over on my side. She knew the major; she knew Spiders, the Sing Sing bird, and she knew the vulture of the gang—the cool, calculating, merciless fiend, Jupiter Junk."

"I went to the old Coop, but they found me out there. I went down into the heart of the slums, but they tracked me thither. I came back to the Coop; it seemed to be the safest place after all. I changed my skin, as it were. I changed my name and hid the box in a niche in the wall, for I dared not take it to a safe in all this city. The idea of my going to a safe company with a box under my arm!

"But it mattered not. I was tracked all

the same. Twice before they finally got the box they tried to rob me, but they were baffled. It seemed as if the queen's ransom was desperate property, but by dint of cunning I hung onto it. More than once I woke in the night and went to see if the curse was safe. It was still there. But the time came. The cunning tiger of the gang—the man with the dark face and the soft hands—came and found me off my guard for a moment—long enough for such as he. I was robbed—I was thrown to the floor, choked by those terrible hands and left for dead there. Then is when Nappers came and saw me; then is when she ran away to tell Policeman Coovert that murder had been done in the old house.

"I came back to life half out of my senses. I knew I had been choked and plundered, that the Tarsian gems were gone, and I also knew who had taken them. But I went out into the night with my brain in a whirl, nor came to myself till I held in my hand a newspaper which told me how Nappers and Coovert had found Jen dead in my room. It beats all your romances, Solon Shook. Jericho Jen dead in my room, strangled by some hand and unknown to the police! It was so terrible that I seemed to fall in my tracks when I read the account.

"You say you are on the trail; you have my story, the true one, of the accursed box and the Tarsian gems. I tried to get them back, and for that purpose I invaded the major's quarters, but I managed to bring away an empty box—nothing in it but the frayed red lining. I have but the one diamond left—the one you see on the table. They have the others; they have the millions in gems which crossed the sea to fall into the pirates' hands, and eventually to descend into mine, to cause a murder and a murderous mystery."

Solon Shook did not speak for a moment; he looked at Tarsus and then turned to glance at the Amazon of the Coop.

"I don't care so much for the gems as I do for the unraveling of the mystery of my room. I want to know who killed Jen. I know a good deal about her history. She was a waif—she was found one night in this city, on the street after a great fire, with nothing to identify her but a brass bracelet, with a serpent head for its worthless setting, and— But there goes Mother Blue-bottle!"

Solon Shook sprung toward the old lady, who had dropped from the chair with a cry, and the next moment she was lying at his feet in a dead faint.

"The room must have been too hot for her," said Tarsus.

CHAPTER XX.

ANOTHER TRAGEDY.

PARRY SPIDERS was determined to find the new hiding-place of Oliver Onyx, the diamond-maker, and Coral.

Coupled with this resolution was a desire for as much secrecy as possible, and he went at once to his self-imposed task.

He believed that by tracking Rogers Rex, the girl's lover, he would be able to ferret out the couple, and with this end in view he hunted up the young man.

Rogers, after his encounter with Jupiter Junk, in the new hiding-place, was a little more careful than usual, for he believed that Coral and her father had enemies who would not hesitate to mistreat them, under the belief that the old man possessed the secret of diamond-making, though he did not suspect that they knew anything about the murder mystery of the Coop.

It was the night after Spiders's resolve to find the couple that he might have been seen watching a young man who was slowly sauntering through a well-lighted street.

This person was Roger Rex, who, unaware that he was watched, but extremely cautious, was proceeding along, when all at once he was stopped by a young girl, who grasped his sleeve.

Looking down he discovered with a start that it was Coral herself.

"In the name of the gods, Coral, what has happened?"

The girl with a frightened look around, drew him toward the buildings where she said:

"I dare not tell you. Father is very sick.

He has seen some one who has frightened him into hysterics, and I came out in the almost groundless hope of finding you."

"What was the troublesome person like?"

"I cannot tell you. I did not see the visitor, but I found father in his chair at the table nearly dead and he may be dead by this time."

"Come, then! We will see what has happened," and Roger hurried away with the trembling one.

Spiders saw all this but was not near enough to catch Coral's words.

He knew that the meeting was an unexpected one and that something startling had occurred, and when the lovers started off he followed, determined to keep them in sight.

Eagerness lent speed to the limbs of both, and the tracker saw them enter a building and ascend a staircase which seemed to lead up into the heart of the structure.

"Found at last, my bird!" ejaculated Spiders, as a smile stole over his countenance. "I have had better luck than I expected, and all that remains for me to do is to exercise cunning and discretion and the game is mine."

Coral led her lover up-stairs to her father's room, the door of which she opened and pointed at the bent figure in the arm-chair.

"There he is, just as I left him," she said to Roger. "He hasn't moved a muscle since I went out to find a friend. See! he is too far gone to be revived."

But the young man sprung to the task of bringing the old diamond-maker back to life and began to rub his hands.

"It is too late," said he, looking up at the girl who stood near by with clasped hands.

"You are going to lose him, Coral."

"All because that person came!"

"If we only knew who that one was it would be a melancholy satisfaction, but it would whet the desire for vengeance."

"It would! it would!" cried the girl, her eyes flashing for a moment under the spell of sudden excitement. "It would call for vengeance, Roger; but we will know by and by."

Vain were the efforts of the young couple to revive the old man, who did not respond to their work, and at last Roger Rex fell back and looked at the girl.

"Where is your nearest doctor?" he asked.

"Alas, that I do not know. I never thought we would need the services of one, and I cannot tell you where he can be found."

The youth looked at the diamond-maker again and returned to his profitless task of reviving him.

"Some one must be found," he cried, desisting at last. "Watch him, Coral. I will bring some one to our assistance."

With this he rushed out and Coral was left alone with her parent.

The girl heard the footsteps on the stairs and then bounded to her father's side.

At the touch of her hand he seemed to revive a little and their eyes met.

Slowly the old man's hand was lifted till it became level with his chin and pointed toward a certain place on the wall opposite.

Coral's gaze followed the pointer and turned for a moment to him.

"What is it, father? Speak, and your wishes shall be carried out."

There was no reply, only there was an effort to speak, and failing in this the diamond-maker continued to point toward the wall.

Coral dropped the hand which she had been holding and crossed the room.

She stopped at the wall and looked at her parent.

"Am I near the place?" she asked.

The girl put up her hand and moved it along the wall, at the same time sending inquiring glances at her father, and now and then she would stop and strike the wall in hopes of revealing a concealed door.

All at once Oliver Onyx fell forward across the table, and Coral with a cry sprung toward him.

She was trying to lift him when the door opened and some one came in.

"Quick, Roger, quick!" she cried, but the next instant her face lost color, for the man standing before her was not her lover, but quite a different person.

He was handsome and well-dressed, almost

dudishly so; his hands were well-gloved, and he carried a ratan cane which he held in his left hand.

"Come!" said Coral, not standing on any sort of ceremony. "My father is dying, and I need help at once."

The stranger sprung forward and lifted Oliver Onyx from his chair, and by main force carried him to a little couch that stood at one side of the room.

Upon this he laid him tenderly and turned to look at the girl who had followed him.

"He seems to be near the end," said he. "What could have happened to have brought on this trouble?"

"I—I cannot tell you. He has been frightened, but by whom I am not able to say. Roger has gone after a doctor, but he will reach us too late."

"You live here, do you?"

"We live here, father and I."

"The Coop turned out to be an undesirable place all at once, eh?"

"The Coop?" and Coral started. "Heavens! do you know that we once lived there?"

"I do, but never mind that. This seems to be a better place, more light and not so high up. You will be safer here."

"Does that say so?" and the white-faced girl pointed at the breathless body of her father. "Safe here, did you say? We are safe nowhere."

"You have enemies, then?"

"Father has. I don't know why. Perhaps his secret makes them, but enemies he has, all the same."

"You should have friends powerful enough to counteract the schemes of those people."

"Our friends may come by and by. But they are coming now."

Spiders—the man with Coral was the eager Spiders of the cabal—turned and looked at the door like a cornered tiger. He had caught the sound of footsteps on the stairs beyond the door, and did not care to meet the persons whom he believed to be out there.

Coral noticed his fear and sprung toward the door saying:

"If you don't care to encounter Roger and the doctor, you may slip out at once, and the room down the hall—the second door—is open and empty."

"Thanks," said Spiders, and the next moment he had bounded from the room and had entered the designated chamber as two persons reached the head of the flight.

In another moment Roger Rex, accompanied by a youngish doctor, entered the room and found Old Oliver lying on the couch apparently dead.

"How did he get there, Coral?" asked the young man.

The girl hesitated and Roger did not press the inquiry as the doctor had gone to the patient and was bending over him.

"You have called me too late," said he, looking at the young man. "Death is here."

Though he spoke in low tones, he was overheard by Coral and she came forward, trying to keep down her great agitation.

The old diamond-maker was dead; the stare in the eyes told her this, and she saw, too, that just before the end, Oliver had, with a determined effort turned his face toward the wall which she had searched at his mute command for a door.

"We must find the person who came and frightened him," said the girl, suddenly calm.

"Oh, some one was here?" remarked the doctor. "I thought so. You did not see him?"

"I was not in the room at the time. I happened to be on the next floor above and when I came back he was in a faint."

"Had this man enemies?"

"He must have had," said Roger.

"You left him in his chair at the table?"

"Yes."

"Did the young lady carry him to this couch?"

Coral came forward again with her face quite white.

"I did not. A gentleman entered the room after you went out, Roger, and carried him thither."

"Where is he now?"

"He did not care to remain and went away just before you came in."

Both Roger Rex and the doctor looked at one another, but neither spoke.

"What is this?" suddenly inquired the doctor, who had gone to the table which was littered with a lot of papers and bits of chemical apparatus.

He had picked up a torn sheet of paper and was holding it in the light.

"There is a scrawl across the sheet, as if a trembling hand had hastily made it. Could the old gentleman have written this in the last moments of consciousness?"

Roger was already at the doctor's side, and Coral had sprung to the table.

"Can you make it out?" eagerly asked the young man.

"It is a scrawl sure enough," was the reply. "It may have been traced by the old gentleman, but with death even then at his heart-strings I can make out a word. It is 'Margaret.'"

"That's a woman's name," cried Coral.

Both Roger and the doctor were looking at the scrawl, which they held in the light, and both saw that the last sentence was unfinished.

"Let the detectives have this," said the young man. "Let them make out what they can, for this seems to be a matter for vengeance."

"But hold! I have it. I can make out the last sentence now, or what there is of it. He seemed to be conscious of the dreadful end; he knew that the visit of the person would be fatal. He has written here: 'I am killed by Margaret Minx—killed—killed—' There it ends."

"Margaret Minx?" repeated Coral, as she looked white-faced at her lover. "In heaven's name, who can she be, and how did she quit the building without being seen?"

This was a question which could not be answered by those who heard it, and the doctor laid the sheet upon the table, and even pushed it toward the puzzled girl.

"That's what it says; it is his last recorded thought, and when you find 'Margaret Minx,' girl, you find his murderer."

Coral made no reply, but stared blankly at the bit of paper.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE GLITTER OF A BLADE.

COOPED up in the room to which Coral had sent him, Spiders the elegant waited till he heard no more noises in the chamber occupied by Oliver Onyx and his daughter, when he slipped forth and made his way from the house.

He had found the girl of whom he was in search; he knew where the pair lived, but he knew also that Old Oliver was near the end of his tether, and that in a short time Coral would be alone in the world.

"Things are coming my way," said the fellow to himself. "I am going to make my play and win the prize in spite of Jupiter, my old 'friend,' and the other obstacles in the way. Add to this, I will get my share of the gems if I have to fight for it. They will have to lie awake nights if they want to beat Parry Spiders!"

He chuckled in glee to himself as he walked off, while at that very moment the old diamond-maker lay dead up-stairs, and Roger Rex and the young doctor were looking at the scrawl his trembling hands had left behind.

He did not return to Major Bullion's house, nor pay Mother Bluebottle another visit, but sought out a place down-town and turned in for the night, feeling that he had won a victory.

Almost at the same time a figure came round a corner and looked up at the building occupied by Oliver Onyx and Coral.

Solon Shook was as eager to find Oliver and Coral, especially the latter, as Spiders had been.

He remembered what Nappers had told him about the girl's visit to the room in which Jericho Jen was found dead in Tarsus's chair, and how she had kissed the cold, white face.

Solon entered the building, but paused almost immediately inside the door.

There was a man on the steps.

Among the shadows that lurked there crouched this man, his face turned from the detective, who had not been seen, as he thought, and his body pressed against the wall.

It looked to Solon as if he had suddenly drawn his body to one side of the step, to let

some one pass, but he soon discovered that this was not the case.

Fresh in his mind was the conversation he had overheard between Jupiter Junk and the major, in the private stall of the wine-shop.

He was a marked man—marked by one of the most cunning scamps of the day, a man sworn to turn tracker himself, and to hunt him down without mercy.

All at once the figure on the stairway moved, and then came down.

Two steps at a time it descended, its agility seeming accelerated by some one above, and Solon could not avoid it.

Suddenly the strange one struck the floor, and stood face to face with Solon.

The hallway was but dimly lighted, there being a gas jet near the wall, but it was a flaring thing which really made more shadows than light.

Solon stood almost underneath it, and the moment he saw the other man alight near him he drew back for a good look, while at the same time he would himself be partially concealed.

"Hello, you," cried the unknown as he faced the detective. "I see now."

The recognition was mutual.

Solon Shook stood face to face with Jupiter Junk, and that individual drew off a pace, and was seen to shut his hands while he made ready for a spring.

In another moment the clue-finder was against the wall, and a pair of searching hands, hot and eager, were at his throat.

It was the work of an instant, and before the detective, cunning as he was, could lift a hand in self-defense.

Jupiter evidently felt that his time had come—a little sooner than anticipated, but it had come all the same.

Solon found himself in the grip of a man fertile in resources, and as strong as a lion.

"I've sworn to rid the trail of you, and when once I catch a fox he never gets out of the trap alive," hissed Jupiter in the detective's face.

"Just as you say," replied Solon as he tried to rid himself of his enemy. "It is a game two can play at."

"Think you so? A game for two? Not so, my fine velvet treader. You don't know the man who has you in the toils. Others have felt his fingers and now you, you!"

One of the hands slipped from Solon's throat and there flashed in the flare of the jet a bit of steel as it was thrown into mid-air by the would-be killer.

"Here's a go!" cried some one who leaned over the rickety bannisters above. "Here's a fight in the hall and one man's got a knife."

Both men heard these words and Solon whose face was upturned saw the dark figure which started down-stairs at the last sound.

"Hold the man with the knife," said another voice. "He may be connected with—you know what, doctor."

But the blade descended and Solon Shook felt a shiver run through his flesh as the keen steel seemed to cut its way to his vitals.

"That for interfering!" cried the wielder of the blade as the stroke was given. "I guess you know me now."

Away went the assassin out of the door and into the street, while Solon with mingled nerve and desperation ran after him, but fell at the threshold and lay halfway outside, his whitening face turned toward the far-away stars.

He did not lie there very long, for two men came down the stairs and bent over him.

"He got it in the breast before I could reach him," said one. "I saw the other one but for a moment. He was as quick as a cat and ran off the moment he dealt the blow."

But the other without replying opened the detective's bosom and placed his hand over his heart.

"He's still alive, Rex," he answered, looking up into the face of his companion, a young man whose countenance betrayed his eagerness.

"But the other fellow struck so wickedly."

"No doubt of that. See where the knife cut the clothing like a razor. But there's no stab wound here."

At this juncture Solon raised himself upon his elbow and looked at the pair.

"Maybe there's no serious cut at all," said he, and to their surprise he got up and smiled.

"Let's go in and see," he went on. "I don't care to look for my wound on the street."

They went into the house when all at once Solon turned upon the youngest of the couple and said:

"You are Roger Rex, aren't you?"

"That is my name; and you—"

"I am Solon Shook."

"It is luck!" exclaimed the young doctor. "Come up-stairs and look for the cut there."

Five minutes later Solon Shook entered a room in which lay the corpse of Oliver Onyx, and both Roger Rex and Doctor Burrows were waiting for him to speak.

"Where is Coral?" asked the shadow.

"I have sent her to my office for the present," said the doctor. "I thought that would be a better place for her just now. You see that Oliver Onyx is dead."

"I see. But there are no marks on the body that I can see."

"True. A man may die violently and no marks be discovered."

"It was sudden, then?"

"Where is the paper, Rex?"

Roger who had pocketed the scrawl found on the old alchemist's table produced it and placed the same into the detective's hands.

"We found that on the table yonder," said he. "The doctor here says that Oliver was frightened to death—that is, he was suddenly confronted by some one—an old enemy, probably, and was not able to withstand the shock."

The detective nodded just a little, but did not lift his eyes from the paper he was eying so closely.

"We have made it all out with the exception of a word or two," ventured the doctor. "You will see that it accused one 'Margaret Minx' of murdering him."

"I have already discovered that," returned the shadow. "But you tell me that the body shows no marks of violence?"

"It was a shock, yet it may have been murder all the same. Who is Margaret Minx?"

Solon Shook slowly shook his head.

"I had taken it to hand to some man of your profession, therefore the sheet is yours," put in Roger Rex. "I suppose the man who so savagely attacked you in the hall below was a personal enemy."

"Perhaps," rather evasively answered the clue-finder. "At any rate he was determined, and but for the inside pocketbook he might have prevented my reading the last written words of Oliver Onyx."

The two men saw the detective fold the sheet and place it in his pocket, after which he looked round the room and went off, promising to do what he could to find "Margaret Minx."

But before taking his departure he said to Doctor Burrows:

"If you are going to shield Coral be sure that you do it well, for Margaret Minx may hate her as well."

"I will stand between Coral and that creature with my life!" exclaimed Roger. "I am her friend and she shall want no defender so long as I can shield her from the conspiracy."

With this the detective went away, not wishing to see Coral in the fullness of her grief and in a few moments he was again upon the street.

Already he had seen Jupiter Junk after his expressed oath.

He knew how savage was the man who had sworn to turn hunter and hunt him down; he had seen him with his hands at his throat and his keen knife in air, and had seen that desperate blade descend in a mad search for his heart.

Solon Shook did not go home.

He had lately come from Tarsus's room where he had listened to the tale of the Tarsian gems, and where he had seen Mother Bluebottle fall in a faint from her chair.

It was a night of events, and perhaps others would follow them before the blush of morning.

The detective made his way to the house occupied by Tommy Flyer, in hopes of finding that versatile genius at home.

Climbing to the room occupied by the boy he rapped and was admitted at once.

"Back again, are you?" grinned the boy, who had just finished a late supper. "Haven't seen you, you know, since Nappers gave you the secret which she kept from the other man. Ah, Nappers is a cute one—almost too cute for me," and he laughed as he threw a peach-stone toward the grate.

"How goes it, anyhow?" inquired Tommy, as the detective did not reply.

"Fairly well, Tommy."

"Any more links, eh?"

Master Flyer was not modest in his inquiries and pushed them eagerly, as if the detective was obliged to share all his state secrets with him.

"No more of much account," answered Solon. "By the way, Tommy, you know nearly every inmate of the Coop?"

"I ought to."

"You know about some of the old diamond-maker's callers, for you once lived in the Coop, and on the same floor with him."

"But that was some time ago."

"Granted. You used to visit the old man yourself, didn't you?"

"Now and then."

"Now, did you ever hear of any one named Margaret Minx?"

The boy started and then smiled. At the same time his eyes seemed to get a gleam of astonishment, and he leaned toward the detective.

"Where did you hear of her?" he queried.

"You know her, then?"

"What, you don't know? Margaret Minx is Mother Bluebottle. It's her society name, I guess."

Solon Shook did not reply, but looked at the boy amazedly.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MAN AND HIS MASTER.

SOLON SHOOK started just a little.

"Margaret Minx Mother Bluebottle?" he echoed. "Are you sure of this, Tommy?"

"Why shouldn't I be sure, knowing the old lady as I do?" was the response. "She is no other than Margaret, but I didn't think you would ever ask me such a question."

There was no longer any use for the detective to question Master Flyer, and a few minutes later he had left that person to himself.

He went back to his room and sat down.

He had been absent some time and he wanted a few moments in which to go over the events of the last few hours.

The scrawl left on the table by the old alchemist stared at him and he picked it up and read it again.

Old Oliver was dead and his hand had traced on the sheet found in his room the announcement that "Margaret Minx" was responsible for his death.

But there was another thing that came in for a share of the detective's thoughts and this was his encounter with Jupiter Junk in the hallway.

By a hair, as it were, he had escaped the steel of the assassin, and perhaps Jupiter believed that he had finished him.

What a tiger this man was.

Sworn to put him (Solon) out of the way, he would not stop until he had accomplished his purpose, and the ferret of Gotham saw that he was dealing with a man of cool nerve and wholly without the instincts of mercy.

Meantime Jupiter had gone back to his master and not long after his meeting with Solon he surprised Major Bullion in his room.

As usual the major was taking his ease with a good cigar between his lips, and his face assumed a pleasant expression as Jupiter came in.

"You've had a tussle, I see," observed the major. "Your collar is torn and your face is slightly scratched."

"I've had a little affair—not much of a one," was the reply. "You see I came across him rather unexpectedly and we had have it for keeps."

"Do you mean the ferret?"

"Of course."

"Well?"

"I left him where I met him—had to do it, you see."

Major Bullion leaned forward and for a moment looked Jupiter in the eye without speaking.

"In plain language you mean that you settled him."

"Why not when I played with this?"

Jupiter drew the long knife and laid it upon the table.

"That is what settles all quarrels of this kind," he went on. "You see, major, when I saw him in the hall I made up my mind that we had to have it out there."

"Yes, I see."

"He was coming up the steps and there was no getting out of the mess."

"And so you went down at him."

"Just so. I went at him like a cat—landed before him ere he could make a move, and then I had him against the wall striking at his heart."

"You two were alone in the house?"

"Not exactly, but no one interfered."

"That's good. Now he is out of the way?"

"I would say as much."

"But what about the other party?"

"Oh, the man I robbed?"

"Yes."

"I know where he is, too."

"You're a trump, Jupiter."

"That's just what I am," grinned the man, crossing his legs. "I am a trump and I never fail."

"Not in the end—I'll admit that—but now and then you fail for the present."

Jupiter bit his lips a moment and looked away.

"The best of us do that," said he. "I thought I made it all right in the Coop, but hang it all! I failed. But anyhow I got what I went after, eh, major?"

"Of course. You got the gems."

"That's what I was to get, you know. I carried out my part of the programme and you have the sparklers."

"Yes."

Junk arose and walked to the window watched by the man in the chair. He stood there a while and then came back to the major over whose shoulder he leaned.

"You couldn't spare a little cash, eh, major?" he said in a soft tone.

"Certainly, Jupiter. How much?"

"Say another half-hundred."

"You aren't playing with the tiger, are you?"

In a moment a scowl darkened the face that looked down upon the major.

"What is it to you what Junk does with his money?" he exclaimed. "He does what he pleases with it and long ago he reached his majority and is a man of his own impulses."

"Of course, but I just asked—"

"I know what I'm doing, so there!"

Without more ado Major Bullion took out his wallet and handed the man some bills, which were soon stowed away, and Jupiter picked up his hat.

"When are you going to find out what's become of Oliver and the girl?" asked the major.

"I can do that any time. If you want to know where they are, you shall have that information any time. But see here. You mustn't make too bold a play. The old man makes diamonds, but he can't duplicate the fine ones on your hands now."

"I know that, but there are several missing, and they must be restored."

"Did it ever strike you that Tarsus may have kept some?"

"I have thought of that. Of course, he may have sold several to keep the wolf from the door, but the gems are so well known—"

"Not in this country, eh?"

"Even here. If the story about them is true, and I have no reason to doubt it, they are pretty well known in America. The man who was killed on the southern coast for the diamonds—killed by this same Tarsus, you see, Jupiter—was known to have the old chart; but the world at large never got hold of the real secret of the romance."

Jupiter had come back and was listening attentively. His face was almost without color, and while the major talked his eyes got a strange, eager gleam.

"We should have no secrets between us," he said at last. "Tell me one thing, major. What right has Mother Bluebottle to the gems?"

"Mother Bluebottle?" exclaimed Major Bullion, almost dropping his cigar. "You

don't mean to say, Jupiter, that that woman has any right to the gems at all?"

"I mean to say just what I've said. Look here. You know something about the Amazon of the Coop. You know that she has been living almost next door to Tarsus ever since he came to the trap—that she knows where he is now, and that she must have seen Jericho Jen come to the place that night a little too late to warn Tarsus."

"She intended to warn him, then?"

"That's just what she wanted to do. But he was gone, and she never left the room alive."

"It's a mystery all around."

"A great one, too," smiled Jupiter. "If you had been in that vicinity that night, which, of course, you wasn't, you might have seen something startling. It was a good thing you were at home, smoking coolly here, while the play was going on. If Mother Bluebottle's keen eyes had seen you there she might have precipitated a scene. But there's something odd about it anyhow."

"What's odd?"

Major Bullion was not looking exactly at Jupiter Junk, but he was waiting with great impatience for his reply.

"This is odd, I say. You see, major, some one came to the room and found Jen there. She must have recognized that person, and that's what sealed her doom."

"Do you think so?"

"It's plain to me. She was found dead in the chair, you know. Her face was distorted, not so much from the terrible choking she got as from fright. I've read the whole thing up in the newspapers and the speculations of the reporters—I haven't let one of them slip. But I'm coming to the odd part of it now. You see, major, the hand that strangled Jen knew how to strangle. They call it the hand of a practiced thug—the reporters do, and many's the tale they've published about the dark chokers of India. Why, bless you, major, they seem to know as much about the thugs as some of us do."

There was a sudden start on the major's part, and he lost color.

For a moment he twisted uneasily in his chair, and then looked away as if he would avoid Jupiter's gaze.

"I was never there, you see, but you've told me a good deal about them."

"I, Jupiter?"

"Oh, not lately, but some time ago, I mean. You remember the week we spent out of town where we matured all our plans about the gems? You became a little reminiscent then, and I learned so much about the thugs, that I felt I could strangle a person myself. It's a cold fact, major; but you see I don't think—"

Major Bullion dropped his cigar and stooped to pick it up before it could burn a hole in the carpet.

"Well, you may find out what's become of Oliver Onyx and the girl. That will employ your time a little, Jupiter, and when you've discovered the pair you may report."

"All right. I was saying that the oddest thing connected with the death of Jericho Jen was this:—"

"Never mind that now," was the reply. "I can wait for the rest of the observation. You may go back to the trail, Jupiter, but remember, you don't want to pick a quarrel with Spiders."

"I won't if he keeps out of my way," was the growling answer. "It all depends upon what Spiders does—the Sing Sing lark! I won't stand any of his chaff, and the way he looks at me makes my blood run like lava through my veins. Let the dog keep out of my way and he won't get kicked."

Once more Jupiter was at the door and there he stopped, looking back over his shoulder at the man in the chair.

"It was this as I was saying," he went on suddenly. "The person who killed Jen was a man as knew how to do it quick. How do I know it? Why, he lost something on the stair as he went from the house. But never mind. There's no Solon Shook to hunt him down now. Good-night, major."

In another moment Jupiter Junk was gone and Major Bullion was alone again.

"I'll go down and see what I can do in the tiger's lair to-night with the new stake," muttered Jupiter, ere he reached the sidewalk. "I had a run of bad luck the last

time, but perhaps it's changed in my favor."

He whistled on the street as if he had not within the last few hours aimed a blow at a human heart with his knife, and before long the shadows of New York swallowed up his figure flitting along the pavement like an uneasy ghost.

All at once Jupiter stopped and fell against a building while he eyed a man who was crossing the street just ahead of him.

"Great Caesar! I thought I had finished that man!" he exclaimed. "Why, I gave him the blow straight from the shoulder, and he wilted in my grip. But that's him—that's the fox on the trail. It beats my time all to pieces!"

And he turned about as the watched one touched the sidewalk and in another moment was following him.

Jupiter had accidentally run across the man he thought he had daggered; he felt that there was yet to be another encounter with Solon Shook, the clue-finder, and he resolved with clinched teeth that it should be a final one.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MOTHER BLUEBOTTLE'S SECRET.

THE news of the death of Oliver Onyx had not reached Jupiter's ears else he might have gone toward the nest of the pair.

He continued to follow the detective some time, now and then wondering to himself if it would not be well to try conclusions with him again that night; but at last he concluded not to do so, and Solon Shook was permitted to vanish without knowing that he had been tracked by the man-tiger.

As for Jupiter, he resumed his tramp and at last turned up where he could lose the money he had received from the major.

This he proceeded to do, and half an hour later he emerged from the building without so much as a dollar of it left.

For a moment he paused in the lamplight and looked like a man in a rage.

"I know where I can make another raise if I wanted to," said he to himself. "I can go and bleed the old woman and she will shell out to a pretty tune."

He thought over the matter a little while and then started off.

"Why not? She's got plenty of it, and what I know is sufficient to make her loosen her purse-strings and pour at my feet all I want."

He listened as he concluded to the strokes of a clock, after which he started on again and at last pulled up in front of the Coop.

He entered at once and ran up-stairs to Mother Bluebottle's door.

"I guess she's at home," said Jupiter. "She doesn't go out o' nights much and when she does it's only for a little while."

He tried the door, thinking to surprise the Amazon of the Coop, but the lock would not yield and he fell back with a look of disappointment on his face.

"Not in, eh? I wonder where she can be poking round at this hour? By the way, why not look in upon the scene of the mystery?" and he turned and went down the corridor to the door of Saul Tarsus's room, or the one occupied by him up to the night of the murder mystery of the Coop.

It was closed and locked like the other one, but Jupiter took a bunch of keys from his pocket and after some manipulating succeeded in getting inside.

He was all in the dark, but he found the burner and turned on the gas, letting it burn just enough to show him the interior of the place.

"They've left things pretty much as they were when I saw them last," he muttered. "No one seems to have been here to disturb anything, and I can't say that Tarsus himself has been back to carry off his own."

Jupiter went hither and thither, looking first into one corner then into another, taking his time as he was going to wait till he heard Mother Bluebottle coming in.

In this way he occupied the next ten minutes, and as a heavy footfall saluted his ears he turned the light down and went to the door.

Mother Bluebottle had come back, but she was not alone.

"In the name of common sense, who's with the old lady?" asked Jupiter. "I can't bleed her if she's not alone. I'll have to wait till he goes away."

He heard the pair approach the old woman's room and a key turned in the lock and the door was opened.

"This is where I live, but you know now," said the coarse voice of Mother Bluebottle. "You want to talk to me, you say. Well, I'll answer you if I care to and if I don't you can make the best of it."

"That's pretty cool," thought the listening Jupiter. "She stands on her dignity, the old woman does, and if she sets her head ag'in' anything the whole world can't turn it."

"You will answer my questions if they suit you; that's what you mean, I suppose?" said another voice at sound of which Jupiter gave a little start.

"I wonder where he picked her up? But that's his business. I know that."

So eager was he to hear all that should pass between Mother Bluebottle and her companion that he opened the door and slipped out into the hall.

There was risk in that, but he had the nerve to do anything, and on more than one occasion he had risked his life in a play just as foolish.

But all at once the voices in the other room dropped almost into whispers, and Jupiter let slip a half-smothered oath.

They were going to baffle him after all.

If he could have looked beyond the door of the Amazon's room he would have seen Solon Shook standing at the little table looking at Mother Bluebottle who had dropped into a chair.

It was evident that the old lady did not relish the idea of being questioned by this man whose calling she knew.

"I may not answer a single question," she said. "You came upon me like a panther. You have been tracking me."

"I have not. You remember that you have seen me in Tarsus's room—that you fainted in the chair and that we restored you."

"Yes, the air was so close there that I had to keel over."

"It was quite close," observed Solon with a faint smile. "Tarsus seems to take to close rooms, but never mind that."

"No. I feel faint yet; but you intend to give me more trouble. What do you want to know?"

"You are Margaret Minx?"

There was a slight start on the old woman's part, but she recovered almost immediately.

"Who tells this?" she inquired.

"One who knows. You are Margaret Minx as well as Mother Bluebottle, and the little girl you lost years ago—"

"There! don't tell me these things," and she put up her hand. "I know all that you say and more too. My God! why have you tracked me down to-night?"

"Just to ask you a few questions."

"Do you think the trail leads to this room?"

"I haven't said so."

"No, but your actions tell me much. As to the little child I once had—why, can't you let that pass?"

"I dare not and remain on this trail which must end in the punishment of the guilty."

"Go on, then."

Mother Bluebottle settled back in the chair with a look of despair.

What was the use of trying to resist or baffle this man of many clues?

Why try to keep from him anything he wanted to know?

"The child was lost after a fire. It was your child, Mother Bluebottle?"

"It was my child."

"She grew up without knowing that you were her mother. You may have seen her during her growth, but you never revealed the secret to her?"

"Why should I do it? You see what I am—a woman hunted every now and then by the police. You know how I make my living? The world knows, for I've been in the newspapers often enough, and the cops know who Mother Bluebottle is, and what she does."

Solon bowed his head.

"It would do you no good to proclaim to the world now that I am Jericho Jen's

mother—that the woman found dead in the end-room was my lost child. If you care to do that you may, Solon Shook, but remember that Margaret Minx, as you have called me, has a heart that can be broken, no matter what I am or have been. Her mother? Yes, I confess it now, for why try to keep the story from you? It's a singular story—one which these newspaper men would weave with a good deal of romance; but you shall have it stripped of all that."

"Not now, Margaret."

"Very well. You don't care to hear how I watched Jen all these years, never telling her that I was her mother, but always intending some day to make everything clear. I never got to do that. The time I opened the door of the end-room and saw her dead in the chair, I thought I should sink through the floor, for it was then too late to take her to my heart and tell her all."

"Did you hear any noise in the room before that?"

"I heard the door open and shut. I didn't know what had taken place, for when Tarsus struggled with his man I must have been sound asleep, for I take something for sleeplessness when my pain is great. I didn't know that Tarsus had been having it against the wall and upon the floor with a man-tiger; I didn't know that the man had been robbed of his treasure, and it was news to me that he had been thus robbed until I opened the door and found Jennie there."

"What made you investigate?"

"The strange footsteps that went down the hall."

"Strange, you say, Margaret?"

"Yes, in more ways than one. You see I have lived here so long that I knew all that generally came up the stairs from below. Some were soft and light, like those of the old diamond-maker's child's, others were quick, like Tarsus's, and still others had different sounds; but I knew them all—all but those that drew me to my door that night."

"You investigated, then?"

"I did. I slipped from my room and went down to Tarsus's door. It stood slightly ajar. I could not keep out, and so I went in. There she was, my child, dead in Saul's chair. For a moment all my life seemed to well up from the abyss of the past, and I stood for half a minute in her presence all unnerved. By and by I went out—slipped back to my room; but I couldn't stay there."

"I resolved to go up-stairs to where Oliver Onyx was. I crept up the steps, and then's when the policeman and the little girl, Nappers, came back. I stood on the upper floor and looked down. By-and-by Coovert went off, leaving the child in the room, and presently Nappers herself came out. I saw her go away. I was leaning over the bannisters with a strap in my hand, and she seemed to look up at me as she went out."

"After that what, Margaret?"

"I changed my mind, and didn't go to see Oliver Onyx. I went back to my room, and got in before Coovert and the officers came back. That's all."

"But who did you see in the hall besides Nappers and the policeman?"

"No one."

"Not Coral?"

"That's the diamond-maker's child. I didn't see her."

"And you haven't seen her since?"

"I have not."

"Nor her parent?"

Mother Bluebottle gave a sudden start. Her gaze wandered from the detective, but soon came back to him.

"I've seen him since. I knew where they went after the flight. I had business with Oliver. I felt that I must see him. I found him, and he was alone."

"Not looking for you?"

"Heavens, no! I came in upon him, and he gave a gasp and fell back like one dead in his chair. I found that it would be no use to talk to him then, and as I didn't care to have the child see me, I slipped from the room and left him."

"He feared you, Margaret?"

"I don't see why he should really. Of course, he never cared to see me, and when I came upon him in the new nest I saw him lose every bit of color he had. I wouldn't have surrendered the secret he has been guarding. I didn't intend to do anything of the kind, but he may have thought other-

wise. Solon Shook, I want you to avenge the death of my child!"

Mother Bluebottle had come forward, and she now towered before the ferret like a mountain.

"It was Jericho Jen, and she wasn't of much account in the eyes of the world, but she was my baby all the same. She was strangled in that room by the person whose footsteps I heard that night, and you must track him down. I will give you the right clue, for I have it. I will put you upon the right trail, for I can tell you something about the strangling hand—the hand that is as deadly as the thugs of India, for its owner was one of them!"

The last words fell in a low whisper from the old woman's lips, and Solon Shook felt that she knew.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOT BLOOD.

THERE was more in Mother Bluebottle's words than appeared on the surface.

As she stopped, the man who leaned against the door with his ear glued to it and his nerves in a tension caught his breath and swore inaudibly because he could not hear every word. In fact, very few had reached him, but these were sufficient to reveal the identity of the man who was questioning the old woman, and his face flushed.

Solon Shook was in there. The man whom he had tried to kill in the hallway of Oliver Onyx's new retreat had come home with Mother Bluebottle and was getting the very secret he wanted.

What should he do—fall back and wait, knife in hand, for the ferret?

He knew that he had failed of his intention in the other house, but here he could wait for Solon at Mother Bluebottle's door; but if he waited he could not expect to bleed the old lady after a tiger battle there.

Jupiter Junk changed his mind. He wanted to stand at the door and attack the clue-finder as he came out, but this was not good policy.

He slipped down stairs as soon as he heard sounds which told him that Solon was about to bid Mother Bluebottle good-night.

Some other time, or he could wait till the detective had gone off and then ply his bleeding lancet.

Solon Shook emerged from the house with something more to take him back to the trail.

Jupiter saw him walk away after which he gave the Coop another look and entered.

Mother Bluebottle would not be looking for him and he would play a bold hand and fill his purse.

But he failed again, for when he reached the door he found it locked and there was no reply to his raps.

Jupiter's face grew dark and a flash of fire illumined the depths of his eyes.

All at once he fell back and half crouched in the hallway.

"She sha'n't lock me out, I don't care what happens," he hissed. "She thinks she will keep me on the outside by remaining as silent as the dead, but it won't do."

In another moment he launched his body against the door and it yielded and fell in with a crash.

The man with the knife landed in the middle of the room and before he could pick himself up he was pounced upon by Mother Bluebottle herself and dragged toward the table.

"You might have known that I didn't want you here," she exclaimed, holding him by the collar and looking him fearlessly in the eye. "You get out of here."

Strong as he was he was a child in the grasp of the female Titan and Jupiter expected at any moment to be dashed against the wall.

"Get out of here!" repeated the old woman.

"Just a minute. Let me explain. If you hadn't kept your door locked—"

"It's my door!"

"I know that, but you see—"

"I didn't want you in here and that's why the door wasn't opened."

"Yes, yes; but, Mother Bluebottle, I didn't come for anything mean. I'm here on a little business."

"I don't want to hear it."

"But you must."

The grip suddenly tightened.

"But I won't!"

Jupiter was roughly dragged across the floor and the door was nearly reached before he could find his tongue.

"If you'll let me explain."

"I won't. I know you, Jupiter Junk, one of the meanest tigers in the litter. I know you and you can't remain here."

He growled, but expostulation was of no use, and he was hustled over the threshold and thrown headlong into the hall.

Jupiter picked himself up and looked at the commanding figure of the giantess as it was presented in the light of her lamp. She never looked so formidable before, and he did not care to try conclusions with her again.

"Some other time, my tenement daisy," grated Jupiter. "I'll see you when I hold the winning card, no matter how strong you are and then you may expect to see stars."

She laughed coarsely at him as he went toward the stairs, down which he vanished as if he feared that the cyclone might come his way the second time.

Down on the street Jupiter Junk came to a halt and looked up at the head which had been thrust from a window. He knew who its owner was, for he could make out the queer looking cap Mother Bluebottle wore and thought he could see the lightning flash in her eyes.

"But it's got to be somebody to-night!" he said to himself. "I'm in the humor and while I'm in I've got to have blood. Why not try Spiders, Mr. Spiders the elegant? Ah, I owe him one anyhow and this is as good a time to settle an old score as could be found. I know what the major tried to get me to promise—that I wouldn't seek a settlement with Spiders; but I didn't promise."

Another farewell glance upward and he moved away, watched by Mother Bluebottle until he turned a corner and was to be seen no more.

Yes, he would hunt up Spiders; he would settle with the third man in the conspiracy and that before he slept.

If Jupiter Junk knew one thing above all others, it was just where to find Spiders at that hour.

The elegant rascal—the man who had rendered some assistance to Coral after the death of her father—lived alone in a well-to-do portion of the city, and thitherward Jupiter, with the tiger at his heart, bent his steps.

He had no notion of keeping his half-promise with Major Bullion.

The old feud between Spiders and himself might as well be settled then as some other time.

True, both of them were in the same plot against Tarsus and the gems; but what of that?

He would "settle" with Spiders that night.

Jupiter did not cool off by the time he reached Spiders's abode.

He was hotter, if anything, and the drubbing he had received at Mother Bluebottle's hands, intensified his rage.

He stopped in front of the house and looked up at it.

It was a two-story brick, well-built and fringed the pavement, a modest-looking place, the interior arrangement of which he did not know exactly.

Jupiter did not know just how to get inside, for he felt that the door was locked; but at last he stepped up and tried it.

Fortune sometimes favors the guilty, for the door was not only unlocked, but stood slightly ajar, and the man on the step could see inside a little way.

He pushed it open still further and went in, stopping in the hall a moment and trying to get his bearings.

He knew that Spiders lived there, but did not know just where.

Was he on the first floor, or did he occupy rooms on the next one?

Jupiter suddenly went to the stairway and looked up.

"He must be up there, for once I heard him tell the major that the man on the lower floor made a good deal of racket with an accordion. Yes, I'll find my prey overhead."

So he slipped up the steps, and at last

halted in the dim uncertain light that prevailed at the top of the flight.

He saw a light over a transom and sneaked toward it.

In another minute this cool head was lifting his body up alongside the door, and all at once he peeped down into a room to see Spiders.

Spiders was just going out again, for he stood at his table drawing on a glove, just like the sleek fellow he was at all times.

"The Sing Sing dude, he never goes out without something on his lady-fingers," mentally observed Jupiter. "What a masher he is, in his own estimation. But it's all for nothing, Spiders. I'll give you something to consider in a moment."

He hung there a little while, looking at the well-dressed man beyond the door—marked for a victim, with all the coolness of the born thug, and then he dropped almost noiselessly to the floor.

He would wait for Spiders.

Presently footsteps came toward the door and Jupiter fell back with his eyes fastened upon the portal.

Seconds were minutes to him.

Suddenly the key clicked in the lock and the door swung open.

In another instant he saw Spiders in the light.

"Ho, what do you want?"

The ex-prison bird had caught sight of Jupiter and had fallen back over the threshold, looking at him and divining the real meaning of his presence in the house.

Concealment was useless now, and with a bound the man of the blade sprung into the room.

For once Spiders was too quick for him.

The sleek garments and the lavender gloves were not for mere show and the man in them was no fool.

With the last word something shone for a moment in the light, and Jupiter was looking into a revolver which was firmly gripped by one of the gloved hands.

Foiled again!

The tiger seemed to die out in Jupiter's nature.

Cornered so suddenly, covered and watched by the very man he had come to settle with, Jupiter Junk saw that courage and defiance would avail him nothing now.

Spiders had the upper hand—the fine-haired Spiders, "the dude from Sing Sing" as he had called him.

"You came to see me," continued the man in kids. "You have taken the trouble to pay me a visit to-night. Now, what is it?"

What should he say? What could he say?

"You won't talk, eh? Look here, Mr. Junk. More than once you have thrown insults into my teeth. More than once you have threatened to 'get even' with me. When will you ever find a better time for settlement? When will you ever get a better chance to get even with Parry Spiders?"

"But I didn't come hither for this."

"Oh, you did not—merely a friendly call?" sarcastically answered Spiders.

"You make these kinds of calls, I understand. You made one upon Saul Tarsus, and once before that night you called upon a gentleman who didn't fare quite as well as Tarsus."

Jupiter grew red in the face.

"I know you, Jupiter. It is true that we belong to the same game so far as the gems are concerned. We have succeeded, thanks to your throttling hand, but you want the division to be by two."

"I never said so."

"Never did, Jupiter? Come. Don't look me in the eye and tell Spiders that. Oh, you don't care to settle with me now?"

During this time the revolver had not swerved a hair. If Jupiter looked for the deadly weapon to fall an inch, and thus give him a chance to launch himself forward, he was disappointed; Spiders was coolness itself, and his eye was that of the eagle's.

"I ought to kill you in your tracks," he said over the six-shooter. "You came hither to kill me. It's plain language, Jupiter, but nevertheless it is true."

"Just as you please, Spiders," answered Jupiter. "I am at your mercy, and you can shoot me down like a dog."

"Don't plead like a child. What chance would I have if I stood at your mercy?"

What chance would I have for my life with you in my place? Tush, man! I am the sole occupant of this house at this hour. The walls are thick, and the police wouldn't find you for a day or two. By that time I might be miles away, or walking the streets of New York right under the noses of the clue-finders and they none the wiser."

There was no reply, and the next moment Spiders, taking a step forward, said in tones that thrilled Jupiter to the marrow:

"I propose to kill you where you stand!"

CHAPTER XXV.

MR. SPIDERS FAILS.

JUPITER JUNK believed that Spiders intended to carry out to the letter his cool threat.

He was in a position to do it, and he had no reason to expect mercy at this man's hands.

Therefore Jupiter stood and waited for doom with the coolness of a stoic.

Beg for mercy he would not. He hated Spiders with all his soul, and he would not cringe to the man. Better death than a whine for life.

For half a minute after Spiders's last words the silence remained unbroken.

"You heard me, Jupiter?" said the gloved one. "You heard what I just said?"

A proud curling of Junk's lips was all the reply that rewarded Spiders.

"But first, you will take a seat at my table."

"Why? If you are going to drop me, I prefer to fall like a man and not sink down into a chair."

"We will see about that by-and-by. Sit down!"

Jupiter moved to the table and sat down. Spiders came forward and opened a drawer

at Junk's elbow, taking care to keep him covered with the revolver.

"You shall have a chance for your life," he went on. "I will give you a lease of existence upon one condition."

"What's that?"

"You will write out the true story of the murder mystery of the Coop?"

Jupiter fell back and looked up into Spiders's face.

"I write that?" he asked.

"Why not?"

"But I may not know anything about it."

"Tush, man! Not know anything about that red puzzle? Come, don't tell Spiders that. Not know whose hand did the deed? You will proceed."

Writing materials had been placed before Jupiter, but instead of dipping into them he continued to watch the man at his side.

"You don't want me to write that which I must some day brand as false?"

"I want the truth as you know it. You went to the house that night?"

"I did."

"You went thither to rob Tarsus—to strip him of the Tarsian gems."

"Yes."

"You came away with the gems."

"That is true."

"A woman was found dead in the same room—found dead in a chair by Policeman Coovert and the girl, Nappers. Now, what I want to have from your hand is the story of her death."

"My God! man; how can I write about that which I did not see?"

Spiders gave Junk a queer look, and for a moment seemed to believe him, but all at once he proceeded.

"You cannot deceive me. You know who killed Jericho Jen, for you went to the house and she was found dead there."

"Do you think these hands did it?" and Jupiter held out his dark hands for inspection in the light.

"They're quite capable of doing anything," said Spiders.

"Look at your own hands, Spiders, and say if they are not equally capable."

A grim smile came for a moment to Spiders's lips, and he looked madness at the man in the chair.

"No insolence," he grated. "You are not in a position to browbeat me to-night. You killed Jen."

"It is false!"

"Look me in the eye and say that, Jupiter Junk."

For a moment the seated man looked rebellious, but his countenance softened and he replied:

"That's easy. I am guiltless of that blood-letting. I never touched Jennie that night."

"Would you swear that?"

"By all my hopes of the future!"

"You thought you had killed Tarsus, though?"

"I'll admit that I did."

"You left him for dead on the floor, eh?"

"Yes."

"But you have an idea who came after you and did the other deed?"

Jupiter was silent and took a long breath as if he had made a new resolve.

"You must tell me what you think," continued Spiders. "You must give me your opinion about that second crime."

"What if I don't choose to do this?"

The revolver came close to Jupiter's face and for an instant he shrunk from it with a perceptible shudder.

"What makes you so anxious about this matter?" he asked at last. "The girl, Jennie, was nothing to you, Spiders."

"Never mind that. I want the truth."

"Oh, you want to play detective—you have become the champion of that dead woman, eh?"

"Not her champion. I am no one's champion, but all the same I intend to know who killed Jericho Jen."

"I was not there when she died. I cannot tell whose hand did the deed."

"I grant that you cannot from actual observation for it seems that she died after you went away with the booty. You got the gems at the expense of Tarsus's life as you thought for you had orders to get them at all hazard. You were to kill, though the slaying was not mentioned at the time. The gems were to be seized even if you had to slay to get them."

Jupiter nodded.

"You heard the orders and you know," he replied a moment later. "But as to Jennie's death I cannot give you the clue."

"Hang it all, man, you have a suspicion."

"I may have that."

"Did Mother Bluebottle do it?"

A strange light came into Junk's eyes and remained there a second.

"Why should she turn slayer?"

"I might ask you the same question," broke in Spiders. "She knew Jen."

"Yes, but she would never have killed the girl. Mother Bluebottle knew who the dead girl was; that is, she must have known, for you and I held the secret, Spiders. I don't see how it could miss falling into her hands. Yes, Mother Bluebottle knew who Jennie was, and she would be more than tigress to have killed her."

"True. If Mother Bluebottle did not throttle Jericho Jen, who did, Jupiter? Who came after you to the end-room?"

No reply.

"Did the old diamond-maker come down the stairs and play thug?"

"What, Oliver Onyx?" and a smile came to Jupiter's face. "Why should he think of choking off the poor creature's wind?"

"Yes, why should he? We will say, then, that neither Mother Bluebottle nor Oliver Onyx killed the girl; now, there is another interested person."

A minute's silence fell between the two, and their gaze met underneath Spiders's table jet.

"You have an idea, Jupiter," he said at length. "You believe you know whose hand it was."

"That is my secret, and you cannot shoot it out of me, Spiders."

Parry Spiders recoiled at the sound of the man's voice. He saw that Jupiter Junk was determined not to give another inch, no matter how near to his dark face was the cocked revolver, and notwithstanding the menace of the gloved finger that touched the trigger.

Spiders had reached the end of the game, so far as his play was concerned, that night.

He might threaten Jupiter again, but it would be a vain threat. He could not bring his old enemy to terms.

"You will not tell me?"

"I will not."

Spiders looked across the room and caught

the reflection of their faces in the mirror on the opposite wall.

He saw how determined was the face of Jupiter Junk, and how his hand lay clinched upon the sheet of paper on the cloth.

It was simply useless to fool any further with him.

"Did the major leave his house that night?" he asked.

"The major, eh?"

"Yes."

"How should I know?"

"You know a good many things. Did he quit the house, I say?"

"You might ask the major."

It was a cool, irritating answer, and one which drove the last vestige of color from Spiders's face.

"I ask you, Jupiter. I am talking to you at this moment."

"I must refer you to the major himself," was the reply. "If he is in a talkative mood you may get all the satisfaction you want."

Spiders gave it up.

He saw that it was no use to try to worm from this man the secrets he carried. He fell back from the table and glanced toward the door.

"You may go."

Jupiter rose and moved across the room to be stopped at the door by Spiders who said mildly:

"I suppose you will treasure this meeting up against me?"

There was a look which spoke volumes, but the lips of Junk did not part.

Treasure it up? That he would, and Spiders seemed to realize that he was dismissing one who at any time might turn upon him and hunt him down with all the ferocity of the tiger.

"Never mind, Spiders. We understand one another now," was all he said, and with another look he opened the door and was gone.

Spiders laughed to himself over the incident of the night, but his face suddenly assumed a half-frightened expression and he bounded to the door himself.

Jupiter was nearly at the bottom of the steps and he caught sight of his figure in the uncertain light of the stairway.

In another instant he had covered the figure with his revolver, and his gloved finger was pressing the trigger when Jupiter with a sudden bound landed at the foot of the flight and seized the knob of the front door.

It was too late to shoot now, for the spot was too dark, and he saw Junk jerk open the door and vanish into the street.

Spiders went back to the table and sat down. He had let Jupiter foil him and the man got away with whatever secrets he carried still locked in his dark bosom.

As for Junk himself he stopped on the sidewalk a moment and looked up at the house.

"What a fool man is!" he muttered.

"That one spared my life only to feel my claws in the near future. Wanted to find out who killed Jennie, eh? Well, he should go and ask the murderer," and with a laugh Jupiter passed on.

Thirty minutes later he stood in the lamp's glare and seemed to be watching some one on the opposite side of the street.

All at once he started across and came up with a little figure that flitted along the pave.

"What do you want?" cried the girl, whose arm he clutched. "I don't know you. Oh, yes, I do. You are the man who once came to see Mother Bluebottle in the Coop. But let go my arm. You hurt me."

Jupiter did not relax his hold, but walked along with the little one.

"Look here, Miss Nappers," said he. "You're out late. Where are you going?"

Nappers's lips met firmly at this and she looked him fairly in the face as she replied:

"I won't tell you why I'm out. That's my business, sir."

Jupiter had to smile in spite of himself.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CORD OF THE THUG.

It was the night after the events we have just narrated and Solon Shook might have been seen in the vicinity of the house occupied by Major Bullion.

We have seen how he once watched it for a spell, but he had never crossed the threshold to get a look at its presiding genius.

Such was his mission now, and in order to carry out this deception he had provided himself with a safe disguise and documents which he was confident would prove an open sesame to the major's confidence.

He rung the bell and after awhile heard footsteps approach the door.

The moment it opened he saw before him the figure of Major Bullion in a green smoking-gown with a cigar between thumb and finger.

Major Bullion looked suspiciously at his visitor who leaned forward and extended a card upon which was printed the name of

"TOBIAS WARREN,

Savannah, Ga."

For a moment Major Bullion looked at the name and then he paid his respects to the man on the step.

"Do you wish to see me?" he asked.

"I wish to see Major Garry, Bullion late of the South."

"Walk in."

Solon Shook walked into the hall and was escorted to a sumptuously furnished parlor where he was invited to take a chair while the major ensconced himself in another and graciously pushed a well-filled box of cigars toward the detective.

The clue-finder took in the room at a glance.

He saw that wealth had furnished it at every turn that the rich carpet, the frescoed ceiling and the handsome pictures on the walls had been selected by a man who knew all about such things.

The table was covered with a fine Indian cloth fringed with silver thread, and in the center stood a night lamp whose golden jets flooded the parlor with soft light.

Major Bullion twirled the detective's card in his hand, glancing at it every now and then as if trying to recall some past meeting with "Tobias Warren."

"I have called to have a little talk with you about a matter in which both of us may be interested," began Solon. "You remember the year '54 when the great storms raged along the southern coast destroying vessels and breaking into the coast line with the fury of a demon."

"I recall that year distinctly," answered the major with astonishing frankness. "I was in the South at the time and I thought we would be swamped—we of the coast, I mean."

"Exactly. I happened to meet that year a gentleman who seemed to have a hobby which attracted a good deal of attention, and mine in particular. He knew you, I believe."

"Knew me?"

"Yes, sir. His name was Tarsus."

Major Bullion did not start at the name, though the keen-witted clue-finder thought he detected the semblance of a smile at his lips.

"I am making a search for this man. I wish to meet him as a matter of business, and as he spoke of you to me at the time, I thought I would call to see if you could put me onto him. I have been in the city but one day, and consequently you will pardon my call at this hour. It is my eagerness that prompts it and that is why I am here."

Major Bullion had time to breathe, but he did not realize that the eyes of the detective were upon him.

"Tarsus, did you say?" he asked.

"Yes, Saul Tarsus, I believe; but wait."

Solon took a memorandum-book from his pocket and consulted it.

"That is the name; but I was not quite sure of it anyhow. He was a well-built man, and I inferred from what he told me at the time that he was in the employ of a person as cranky as himself. It's a strange story—the one he half told me—about some lost gems which had once been the property of an exiled queen. But it is not about those gems that I care to consult Tarsus now."

"You haven't been looking for him ever since?"

"Oh, no. I began my present quest but a few months ago, and I have no hesitancy in saying that thus far it is up-hill work. Beyond a belief that he may have come to

New York, I have made no headway, and I fear the chances are that I will not soon find my man."

"It might have been well to have employed some good detectives," suggested the major.

"I never had very friendly feelings for these men. You see I don't like to engage in a man-hunt, and I have decided to conduct my own so far as I can."

"That's right. These men are not the sleuths they are said to be. Besides, they work for money alone, and stand ready to sell you out to the highest bidder."

"My idea, exactly."

Major Bullion seemed pleased that his remarks found favor with Mr. Tobias Warren, and he proceeded:

"Indeed, sir, I wish I was able to give you some definite information concerning the man you are looking for. I think I recall him, but I met so many people in the South that I cannot recall them all. He was a strange man, I remember."

"Quite strange. He was daft on the subject of the lost gems, and would not talk about anything else. If I mistake not, he was accompanied by a gentleman who seemed to direct his movements. But all this may be mere speculation."

"Just so. The stories of lost gems are so frivolous at best that one need not take much stock in them."

"I never did," said Solon, puffing away at his cigar for a moment, but studying the face of Major Bullion through a rent in the white smoke. "You seem to enjoy life here."

"I do, though New York never had many attractions for me. I like a roving life."

"Exactly. I used to be a sort of rolling stone myself, and of late years have thought of going back to the old existence. There's more real life in one day in, say, Calcutta, than in a year's existence in this metropolis."

For the first time Major Bullion started visibly.

The mention of the Indian city seemed to stir his blood and he got a flush in the face.

"There's the mystic at its best," continued the detective. "I can't say that I ever was in danger of becoming a brahmin myself, but you see there's something in the air there that sends a thrill through one as if he had leaped into a new life and was ready to live a thousand years."

"Jove! man, you're right!" cried the major. "I felt so myself all the time."

"Oh, you've been there then?"

"Haven't I? Didn't I spend ten of the best years of my life among the tamarinds and the deodars? Didn't I wander through the old temples and drink in all that was solemn and mystic?"

"I believe we ought to be congratulated," said Solon. "To think that we of many men have tasted the glories of the East and have shared with the mystic his dark but fascinating belief!"

"That's a fact. When were you there?"

"I went out to India in the fall of '60, and came back in the spring of '67."

"I had come away before then."

"I lived a year in Cawnpore, but later went to Benares where I thought I had settled permanently. I got into a peck of trouble and all foolishly and thought it best to come away."

"Nothing serious, I hope."

"Not as I viewed things at the time, but you see when a man fools with the religion of a fanatic he must expect to get into trouble."

"I made it a rule never to do that while in the East."

"I thought I had, but you see I was a little too inquiring, and the first thing I knew I had Thuggee after me."

"Indeed!"

"I might have had the whole dread people at my heels but for the kindness of a native prince who helped me out of the country. I was very glad to get away."

"I should think you were. I never tried to interfere with the people of India, and therefore I got along very well with them."

"I might have done the same, but for a bit of idle curiosity. I wanted to possess myself of a cord—that is one of the cords which the thugs use to strangle their victims, and this is what nearly cost me my

life. I almost got the cord in a manner that would not have been very pleasant."

"Under the chin, eh?"

"Just so. I never got possession of the cord itself, but I did get out of reach of it."

"Didn't you ever see one of the strings?"

"Never, but I shall not go back to India just for a look at one of them."

"You might be favored with a look nearer home. I was more fortunate than yourself. I brought away with me the cord of thuggee, as it is called."

"That's better than feeling it round one's neck," smiled the detective. "But this is getting far away from Saul Tarsus, the man I am looking for."

"We can get back to him by-and-by, but I will say now that I can give you no information regarding him. The man has vanished from the face of the earth so far as I know; but I want to show you what you missed in India."

Major Bullion crossed the room and opened a drawer in a mahogany stand against the wall.

Solon Shook watched him till he turned to come back, when he saw that something black dangled from his hand.

It was a cord, not very long, but for all this it looked dangerous, and the major handled it in a careless manner which added to its powers.

He approached the table with a smile and sat down again, but almost immediately leaned toward his visitor as he toyed with the cord.

"This is the sign and the power of thuggism," said he, throwing the cord upon the table, where it suddenly curled up like a serpent. "You see it doesn't look very dangerous, but in the hands of one who knows how to use it it is the deadliest slayer in the world. I got it of a friend—a person whom I always suspected of being connected with thuggism—in return for a favor extended to him, and that is how I come to show you the cord here in America."

Solon Shook eyed the little cord while Major Bullion spoke, and saw him pick it up and play with it like one who really knew how to use it.

"Looking at it here in your room, major, is far better than feeling it round one's neck in India," he remarked. "Do you think that cord was ever used?"

"It would be strange if it had not taken life. Very few cords have no victims to their credit."

"I have heard as much, I believe. But it ceased to do murder when it left India."

The cord seemed to quiver suddenly in Major Bullion's hand and he looked up at the clue-finder.

"It has been in my possession ever since and that ought to be proof enough of its peaceful sojourn in this country," he remarked smiling at the same time.

"Of course. You did not imbibe thuggism with the ownership of its symbol."

"I had all the opportunities. I might have learned to use the cord with the most accomplished of them. For instance!"

He drew back and suddenly threw the cord round the heavy stem of the lamp on the table and Solon Shook saw it coil there like a living snake.

There was something terrible and dextrous in the cast of the cord, and as Major Bullion fell back in his chair and threw a triumphant glance toward the detective, a thrill pervaded Solon's nerves and he thought of something that nearly drove him with a spring from his chair.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ROPES OF SAND.

THE clue-finder of Gotham watched the cord on the lamp with the most intense interest.

There was something horribly real in it, and the dark faced man who had sent it there was as cool as a thug himself.

"You see how they do it?" he said, looking over at the detective. "Of course, not being one of them myself, I cannot wield the cord with that agility that distinguishes the stranglers of India, but that is a fair sample of how they send their string to the throat of their victims when they want to rid the world of them."

"You appear to have the knack of it anyhow seems to me, major."

"Tut, man. Why, a thug would stand across the room and cast his cord with ease. At other times they sneak behind the marked one and strangle with their hands, but you who have been in India have heard of such things."

"Yes," said Solon. "Once on the road from Benares south I came across a body which showed no marks and I was afterward informed by an English officer that it was thugs' work."

"I doubt it as the thugs usually bury their dead. That is one of the unwritten chapters of the dread code. At any rate so I have been informed. But you escaped the cord by getting out of the country; I congratulate you, sir."

Deftly did the fingers of Major Bullion uncoil the cord from the lamp-pillar, and the detective watched every movement.

"I may be keeping you at home against your will," he suddenly said. "I didn't come here to cause you to break any engagement, simply to inquire after Saul Tarsus, the man who was daft on a lot of gems a good many years ago."

"Wish I could find him for you," smiled the major. "As it is, I don't know where to look for him. He may be within reach, and then he may have put a sea between him and us."

"Of course. But if you should hear of him would you mind communicating with me?"

"Not at all. If you will give me your address I will send you any intelligence that may prove of benefit to you."

Solon Shook produced a card upon which he scribbled an address and tossed it upon the table.

"A letter will reach me there," he said. And now thanks for your kindness to night. It has been real pleasure to me to meet a gentleman who, like myself, has dwelt under the tamarinds of the far East."

"And your visit has pleased me. I trust this is not the last time we will meet. I see but few people who once lived under the rule of the rajahs, and your coming has recalled old times, and put me in a pleasant mood."

Half a minute later Solon Shook had said good-night and was at the door.

As he went down the steps and out into the night, passing near a lamp, a figure which dodged behind a tree on the sidewalk watched him with scintillating eyes.

"What means this?" muttered the individual. "Been to see the major, eh?"

Instead of following Shook the speaker turned into the house, the door of which he opened with a latch-key, and in a few seconds he stood face to face with Major Bullion.

"You must have run across my caller, Jupiter," exclaimed the major, speaking first.

"Who was he?"

"This tells you," and the Tobias Warren card was pushed toward Jupiter Junk.

The brown fingers picked it up and the dark man read the name under his breath, after which he elevated his brows and looked surprisedly at the major.

"Tobias Warren, eh? And you let him go?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

A slight chuckle parted Jupiter's lips, and he picked a cigar out of the box.

"Of course I let him go. He was looking for an old friend of ours."

"The deuce he was."

"He had business with Saul Tarsus."

"I've no doubt of that."

"He dropped in to see me, remembering that years ago Tarsus mentioned my name to him, and somehow or other he learned that I was in the city, though he has been here but a day."

"By Jove! that's the tale he spun, is it? Well, he's one of the clever ones. Completely hoodwinked you, major."

Major Bullion seemed to get a look of genuine alarm, and the following moment he had bent forward and was looking at Jupiter, with but little color in his face.

"Don't you think that man was square?" he ejaculated. "He has been to—"

The man checked himself and resumed:

"Whatever he was he impressed me quite favorably. I had no reason to doubt that he was looking for Tarsus."

"Neither have I, but there's where the trouble lies. That man was no more Tobias Warren, of Savannah, than I am the Grand Mogul of Halifax."

"Who was he, then?"

"Solon Shook."

For a moment the major's look was a blank stare, and then the cigar dropped slowly from his fingers.

"Solon Shook, the detective?" he almost gasped, much to Jupiter's amazement.

"He was the clue-finder and no one else. I got a look at his face—saw it a moment in the light of the lamp—but that was long enough. You must not forget that I have been very close to that man; I have stood within arm's length of him, and that with a light full in his face. Tobias Warren, eh? Well, I don't think he would have pulled the wool over my eyes."

Major Bullion seemed to fall back helpless into the depths of his chair.

"Jupiter," he cried, after a full breath, "you must find that man for me."

"Mr. Tobias Warren, do you mean?"

"Come, don't taunt me. I am wretched enough. I ought to put a pistol at my head, after such a play of assinnity on my part. What a chance I had, too! Had him all alone with me for twenty minutes, and I had the—I mean I had the game in my hands."

"Better luck next time," said Jupiter. "He won't call soon, that is if I find him."

"Find him you must. No failure, boy. You must hunt him down and no grass must grow under your feet during the search."

"Not a blade, major."

"To think that I was hoodwinked so cleverly! Well, he is the prince of his calling. And I never once suspected. It makes me sick."

Jupiter, puffing away at his prime Havana, smiled to himself and furtively watched the excited man.

"Do you know where to find him?" asked Major Bullion.

"I don't think I will have to hunt for him very long."

"So much the better. Can't you find him yet, to-night?"

"I might; but, really, I would like a little rest. I've had a little adventure myself."

"Nothing serious, Jupiter?"

"Not serious, but a trifle dangerous. Of course I'll look for Tobias Warren of the South. Wants to find Tarsus, does he? I don't blame him, do you, major?"

The reply that Jupiter received was almost inaudible, and the next moment he had turned his chair to the table and bent over a sheet of paper.

Major Bullion looked on and saw that Jupiter was drawing what looked like the diagram of a house, and after watching him a moment he said:

"You don't want to make a mistake after once getting inside, I see."

"Exactly. I want to know just what I'm doing. I've got it pat now," and he folded the paper and put it in his pocket.

"You didn't tell that man anything, did you?" he asked, looking at the major. "I mean you didn't tell him about the gems?"

"Heavens, no! What would I mention them for?"

"Just so. I thought you wouldn't give them away. And of course you didn't go back and give him an insight into the past of any of the gang?"

"No."

"Nothing about me?"

"You wasn't mentioned in the talk?"

"I'm deuced glad of that. And of course Spiders wasn't in it, either?"

"Of course not. He was after Paul, you know."

"Yes, but then he was liable to branch out, seeing who he is and what he's after. These clue-catchers are shrewd men and go round the bush in such a way as to deceive the best of us. I'm glad, however, that he didn't see fit to get into our past—to go behind the curtain as it were. He might have wanted to know something about how Spiders got out of the cage; how Jupiter Junk once gave the beagles the slip; or how you have fared since you left India."

The start on the listener's part was sudden and his face flushed to his temples.

"You mean since I left the South?" he exclaimed.

"No," answered Jupiter, leaning across the table with the cunning leer of a fiend. "I mean since you left India."

"But I have never been there. You are mistaken, Jupiter."

Not a muscle of Jupiter's face moved; his chin rested on the edge of the table, and his eyes seemed to read the very thoughts of the man on the other side.

"Pardon me, major; I mean since you left Calcutta," he said deliberately and in a manner which showed that he was not to be misunderstood. "You've been there; you've been in the strongholds of the East Indians. If not, what makes you carry a cord in your bosom?"

There was an actual cry of horror from the white lips of the man who heard these words, and the dark eyes of Jupiter Junk continued to watch him with the intensity of a reptile's.

"You want to deceive me," he went on. "You want to say that you have never been in India, major; that you haven't hobnobbed with the heathen there, and that you don't carry in your bosom the sign of the stranglers—'chokers,' as we call them here."

What could the major say? How could he avoid the searching gaze of the man across the table and deny that he did not carry the black cord in his bosom?

"Don't think that I mean to betray you," Jupiter went on at last. "You must not think that Jupiter Junk dreams of treachery. There isn't a drop of traitor blood in his veins. He stands by his friends through thick and thin. He never betrays, never!"

These were reassuring words, but were they true? Jupiter could look his master in the eye and speak with all the calmness of the practiced desperado.

This is exactly what he did, and the words came from his tongue with the oiliness of the prince of liars.

"Never mind. I don't care to see the cord. I hope you didn't let Solon Shook see it."

"Why should I when I never carry such a thing on my person?"

Jupiter laughed, but it seemed more of a laugh of pity than one of derision.

"We won't waste words. You want me to find that man. You have asked me to hunt him down so that he can't use his visit against you. Isn't that it, major?"

"You understand the situation exactly, Jupiter. Don't fail."

"I never fail; but you don't want to let him in here again. If he comes give him the cord!" and with this Jupiter strode across the room, watched by a breathless man whose hand stole furtively to his bosom while he seemed to gasp for life.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BACK IN THE RED ROOM.

MAJOR BULLION looked after the man-tiger a moment and then left the room.

"Will Jupiter carry out his intentions? Will he go at once to the task and see that this man is silenced? I have trusted Jupiter before, but something in his look as well as in his language tells me that the man is turning. Where is Spiders?"

But, Spiders did not come, and the head of the conspiracy—the holder of the Tarsian gems—waited till past midnight for his other partner.

Meantime Solon Shook, the clue-finder, was busy, but in another part of the city.

The shrewd detective, lured as he knew he was by Jupiter Junk—hunted with all the vengeance of a tiger—kept out of that worthy's way, and turned up in Mother Bluebottle's room.

The Amazon of the Coop was not looking for him, and started visibly when she opened the door and saw him standing before her.

For a moment she looked displeased; then she held the portal open for Solon to enter.

"I am not here for long," explained the detective. "I have come for a little information which you may have omitted in our last conversation. You told me to look for the hand that took Jen's life among those who once lived in India."

"Did I?"

"You did, Mother Bluebottle, and I have come to you with a single question."

"It's lucky it's but one," smiled the old

lady. "I am not given to answering questions."

"But you have commanded me to discover who killed your daughter."

"Ay, that I did, and you must not stop till you have found out."

"Talk to me, then."

Mother Bluebottle, or Margaret Minx, settled back in her chair and looked at the detective.

"What do you know about Major Bullion?"

She started a little.

"I don't know him by that name."

"Oh, you don't, eh?"

"He may be Major Bullion to you, but to me, if he is the man I'm thinking about, he is Gon Docra."

"Gon Docra?" echoed the clue-finder.

"That's a strange name, I'm thinking, and I guess it strikes you as being such; but that is his name."

"But, the man is an American."

"So he is," again smiled Mother Bluebottle. "Yes, he is one of our countrymen, but that doesn't prevent his being Gon Docra."

"You mean that he has been to the Indies."

"He spent the best or the worst years of his life there. He is a Brahmin in religion, if religion he has of any kind, and Gon Docra is the name he got in that country."

Solon Shook thought of the man he had just seen and of the cast of the cord.

"You have known him a long time, Margaret?"

"For years. Indeed, I have known this man almost from his childhood."

"But you haven't seen much of him since he settled in New York, have you?"

"I've seen enough of him," was the quick reply. "This man is dangerous and when I told you to look for the trail where lived one who had seen the East, I meant every word of it."

"You mean to tell me that he holds the secret?"

"I want to see you find the trail and if it leads to Gon Docra's house good and well."

Mother Bluebottle ceased and put out her hand to a table, the drawer of which she opened.

"You don't know much about me," she went on. "You haven't thought to inquire into my past, but you have been tracking other people which perhaps is all right. But you should have looked a little after me. I am Margaret Minx. I am also Mother Bluebottle, and the night of the crime I stood on the upper floor leaning over the bannister as Nappers told you. Nappers, who is keen-eyed, says that I appeared to be holding a strap in my hand and I admit this. It was not the cord they use in India, like that which Gon Docra can tell about if he will. No, no. It was quite another sort of strap and I was holding in my hand at time a clue to the guilty one."

"Come, you have never mentioned this before."

"I have kept this back. Let me tell you, Solon Shook. You are a man of many parts, and this trail may have light spots just now, but then all was dark, and, detective as you were, you did not know where to look for the clue. I have told you about the strange footsteps that came down the hall and seemed to end at the door of Tarsus's room. I told you that they were unlike any that had heretofore come to the Coop; but I never told you that I recognized them."

"No, you kept that back, if you knew."

"Time was when I knew the walk of a certain man as well as my own. Time was, I say, when I could tell his coming in the dark and when he could not have deceived me with his tread. But years make vast differences, you know. We forget many things, but a man will always have the same step until he drops into old age and loses his vitality."

Solon smiled at the old woman's garrulity.

"But you are wanting to hear about the man who came to the Coop that night."

"When I heard him go away I slipped out of my room, taking with me a strap, and made my way to the upper floor where I waited. You cannot guess why I went up there and stopped near the door of the old

diamond-maker and his daughter. Oliver Onyx was known to me, but he did not care to meet me. We never met after he came into the Coop, and as he never went out alone, I never got to see him, though now and then I encountered the girl, Coral, on the other floors. I had made up my mind to strangle the man below if he should take a notion to come back and try to reach the strange couple."

"Oh, you were going to defend Oliver and Coral?"

"That's it exactly. I intended to interpose my body between them and danger. You would never be able to guess why, Solon Shook."

The detective shook his head and waited for Mother Bluebottle to proceed.

"We are brother and sister!"

"You and Oliver?"

"Me and Oliver Onyx. We don't look alike, he with his sorrowful face and mine all red and large. Still, the same home knew us, but years and years ago, long before our paths diverged, mine to fall into evil fields and his to lead him into strange places."

"But the child, Coral?"

"Is not his daughter. She came to him in an odd way and as a storm-child. She fell to him by some singular luck and remained with him. But Coral does not know the secret, and of course I never sought to tell her. Oliver never cared for me, though he seemed to know that the Coop sheltered both of us. He had in certain men enemies who had harassed him for years; he was hated and hunted by the very gang that has crossed your trail. I went to him at last to tell him that they were after him still—as much for Coral's sake as his own—but you know the result. He fell back in his chair like one in a faint, and I slipped from the room without being seen by any one, for Coral was out at the time."

The hand of the speaker opened with her last words, and a little miniature dropped out upon the table.

"Here we are, brother and sister," she went on, as the detective picked up the daguerreotype and leaned forward to look at it. "We were young then, and this was taken in what was at the time a happy home; but, years have intervened, and I am Mother Bluebottle of the Coop and he—well, he is the old diamond-maker of New York."

It was a very strange revelation, and one that had interested the clue-finder from the first.

He looked at the youthful faces depicted in the picture, and at last turned to the silent woman.

"You tell me that the gang hunts him?" he said.

"Yes, but not for his diamonds. He never made large stones, just tiny gems, which took his blood, as it were, in their making. He and Coral have lived together, hiding from the world, but in vain. They discovered him months ago; they knew that the pair inhabited the Coop; and consequently they were watched. More than once I have seen shadows in the old house and heard footsteps on the stairs, but never until that night did I hear his feet there."

"The feet of the man from India, you mean?"

"Gon Docra's."

The detective looked into the eyes before him and saw them flash.

"You hate this man, Mother Bluebottle?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

Her hands tightened and her face lost color.

"You would have him handed over to justice?"

"Pray, why shouldn't I? What's the use of letting this wretch longer escape the noose?"

"You know all about his crimes?"

"No, not all about them. I am not Jupiter Junk, neither am I Spiders, the elegant. These men know more than I do about certain things; but when it comes to the one crime—to the death of my poor lost Jen—they can't stand in my way."

Solon saw the old lady rise and wobble across the room, stopping at the wall, where she suddenly turned a picture aside.

A little opening in the wall was thus revealed, and she thrust in her hand.

"The time has come!" she said, coming back to him with something in her hands.

"The day for vengeance long delayed has arrived. I had hoped to confront him myself with the evidence of what he has been, and what he must be now, but I leave that to you. You may have picked up more than one link in the chain yourself, but let it remain for Margaret Minx to supply the last ones."

She sat down again and looked across the table.

Her hands seemed to clutch the packet with more firmness, and Solon Shook looked into her face while he waited for the full revelation.

"I have lived for years in the shadow of certain death," she resumed. "These sudden visits by the police, midnight calls—have told upon my nerves, and I am in the very shadow of sudden doom. I feel at my heart even now the hand of death. I have been warned a thousand times and at all hours. The night Jen was murdered down the hall I felt the touch of the dread hands, and some day or night they will find me as Nappers found her—dead in my hand; but not strangled, I hope, by the cord of the thugs."

Slowly the hand of the old woman came up over the edge of the table and rested there a moment.

"This is for you. I never write much, but I could not help adding something to the documents concealed in this little packet if what I know of the man it tells about. How did I get it? You must remember, Solon Shook, that I am a law-breaker—they say so, at least, and they know. I am no rose of Sharon nor am I a lily of the valley. Mother Bluebottle—I'd rather be called that than Margaret Minx—is the name that fits me best; and I have been a real bluebottle, too, sitting in this den waiting for the flies that came. You will take this and look it over. It is true, though homely written. It is the legacy which Mother Bluebottle bequeaths to justice. It is the last will and testament of one of the transgressors of the law."

She threw the packet over to the detective and it fell at his hand.

It was a roll neatly tied and appeared as thick as one's wrist.

"You can read it in a few minutes. The writing is plain, all except that part which I have added. I never wrote well for I never got the chance. After you have read it, act, Solon Shook, and may the hand of vengeance guide you to the right one!"

Already the hand of the detective had closed on the roll and he was carrying it to his pocket when Mother Bluebottle threw one hand to her lip and looked warningly at him.

"You heard it, didn't you?—the opening and shutting of the door at the end of the hall?" she whispered. "Some one is in 'the red room' as the people of the Coop call it. Let us see."

Solon was at the door before Mother Bluebottle reached it, but her hand got ahead of him.

"Let me go first. It may be him," she said in a hiss and the next moment she was in the hall.

Solon stepped out to see the huge figure of Mother Bluebottle bounding toward the door, and the following second, as a light appeared in the room of the tragedy, she threw herself against it and forced it open."

There was a slight cry as she fell across the threshold, and when the detective reached it he saw her clutching a man's wrist as she dragged him forward with a chuckle of delight.

"Look, Solon! It is not the man I thought it was, but see whom I have captured!"

Already the clue-finder knew the man and when he saw him a broad smile overspread his face and he laughed.

"I thought I might steal back to the old place and not get caught; I came back to look after a certain matter which I could not desert any longer, but Mother Bluebottle has nabbed me like a rat in a trap."

"But I'll let him go," cried the old lady, releasing her prisoner as she spoke. "There, Saul Tarsus; you can't say that Mother Bluebottle kept you manacled very long."

The man caught in the room was Tarsus, and he turned to Solon Shook with a faint smile as he was set free.

CHAPTER XXIX.

EXIT JUPITER JUNK.

JUPITER JUNK left Major Bullion with a derisive grin on his face.

He had played a bold hand and it had not been played without results.

The man-tiger of New York had seen the major wilt under the accusations he had made, and this is what lent a pleasurable aspect to his dark countenance.

If the Man from India thought for a moment that Jupiter intended to carry out his promise to hunt down Solon Shook that night, he reckoned without his host.

Jupiter had another score to settle and that was the elegant Spiders.

He did not relish the scene he had lately held with that worthy in his room; he did not thank Spiders for sparing his life, and the hatred between the two men could be checked in but one way—the death of one of them.

With the old tiger at his heart, Jupiter made his way down the street and at last turned up in his own den-like chamber near the river.

"I've got hold of his secret and he suspects it," he exclaimed with a chuckle. "I never went so far as I did to-night, and he knows that I know that he carries the cord."

He threw his hat upon the table and took out a cigar which he had brought away from Major Bullion's.

"I've got him in my hand at last—got him fast," he went on. "I can crush him at any time, or I can feather my nest and in the end have all the Tarsian gems. Fool that I was that I didn't keep them when I had them in my fingers. But that wouldn't have done; no, I did the right thing—took them to him according to programme, and got a fair look at them. No, I have only to deal with Spiders, the man in my way, and after that I can play out my hand with the major. Oh, I've got him in my fist, and with what I found in the house after Jen's death, I can make or mar just as I please."

He puffed away, but did not air his thoughts again, and after awhile he threw the stump of his cigar into a spittoon and sprang up.

"It's not late yet," said he. "I might as well begin now and get a good start for the last inning. They won't suspect me—leastwise they won't for a spell, but he may. Well, what of that? I have him in the vise, haven't I? Play your hand coolly and cautiously, Jupiter Junk, and you will hold all the cards at the end of the game."

Once more upon the streets of Gotham the man of evil walked rapidly underneath the lights and vanished.

"Yes, I'll play one hand now and the other some other time," was his last chuckle as he boarded a car and settled himself in one corner, with his hat pulled over his eyes.

He was carried through a tangle of streets, and did not seem to know where he was going, but all at once he sprang up and bounded from the car while in motion, alighting near a corner and starting at once toward the sidewalk.

Jupiter's sharp eye had caught sight of a man on the pave, and in another moment he was at his heels.

"Just saw him in the nick of time," he muttered. "Just happened to get my peepers on him. Now let me show him what a fool he was to spare my life when he had it in his hands."

The man watched by Jupiter was elegantly dressed, and was flitting along with no suspicion that he had any one at his heels, and the night-wolf followed with almost noiseless tread, not losing sight of his prey for a moment.

Spiders never looked back, but pursued his way homeward, without thinking that the man he had spared had turned hunter, and was even then his evil shadow.

Jupiter saw Spiders stop in front of his house and open the door.

He knew the arrangement of that place now, and Spiders had told him that he was the sole occupant of the building.

That was enough for the man of crime.

He waited till the door had closed upon Spiders, when he reached the steps and rung.

A man half way up a flight of steps stopped and listened.

Half a minute later he came down and opened the door.

Jupiter, with his nerves collected, bounded into the hallway, and the following second there was a cry and an oath, and two men went against the wall under the lamp.

It was the attack of the tiger—the spring of a wild beast and the fierce grapple of enemies in the dim light.

Five minutes later a man opened the door and stole into the street.

He pulled his hat down over his brows, and slouched off, taking care to keep in the shadows and watching over his shoulder as he hurried along.

"I told him that he would rue the hour he spared me," said this person to himself. "I warned him and he would not."

Jupiter Junk brushed his clothes in the dark and kept on.

He did not stop until he entered a little den near the water, where he retired to a private stall with what he had ordered.

Midnight came.

Jupiter Junk was there yet.

One of the waiters of the place went to tell him that they did not care to have customers who held on to the stalls and did not order anything.

He opened the door and looked in.

There sat Jupiter, sodden with the vile stuff sold in the den, and to all appearances dead drunk.

"Here," said the waiter. "You must get out. It's closing time and we—"

"It's false! I didn't!" cried Jupiter, breaking from the waiter's grasp.

"But you must go, man. You don't know what the time is and you can't sleep here."

"Let me go," and Jupiter staggered against the wall, his eyes on fire and his face almost white. "You can't arrest me; you're no cop. I say I didn't kill him and you can't prove it."

"But heavens, man—"

Here Jupiter whipped out a knife at sight of which the terrified waiter ran from the stall and set up a signal of alarm.

"It's a lie. I didn't kill him, I say. You'll find him dead, but I didn't kill Spiders. No, not Jupiter Junk. It isn't his way."

In another instant a bluecoat appeared at the door and Jupiter dropped the knife to the floor.

He was collared in a moment and led from the stall.

No one seemed to think of the knife, but some one suddenly caught sight of it on the floor, and the policeman's arm was touched when he reached the sidewalk with his prisoner.

There was blood on the blade—blood from hilt to point, and Jupiter gazed stupidly at it as he was hustled along.

Shut in the cell to which he was taken the man-tiger of New York fell into the dead sleep of the inebriate.

The people who examined him saw dark spots on his garments which, with the red-stained knife, made things look bad for Jupiter.

"But who is he?"

Nothing upon his person gave the slightest clue to his identity until the searching hand of the officer touched something underneath his shirt.

Presently the same hand drew forth a crumpled envelope which had been thrust down into the depths of an inside pocket, and poured out upon the station table a coil of black cord, at which several men gazed with curiosity.

"It's a cord like the thugs'," said one. "But this man never depended upon it, for look at the knife."

"But see how slick it is and how it seems to coil of its own accord on the table. This man has killed, but not with this."

They fingered the little cord, remarking about it in more ways than one, and at last some one said:

"Let me call up Shook."

"But you may not find him for half a day. Solon has been busy in a field of mystery, and may not care to be disturbed, not even for a thing of this kind."

"But I'll see if he's in."

It did not take long for the sergeant to go out and return with Solon Shook, who had just come back from his last interview with Mother Bluebottle.

The detective was shown the knife and the cord.

He seemed to recognize both.

"Where is the man?" he asked.

"In cell nineteen."

He went thither and the door was opened.

In one corner lay Jupiter Junk with his head against the iron bars and his face tensely drawn like that of a man in dire agony.

Solon stooped over him and touched him on the shoulder.

"Jupiter?" he said. "Mr. Junk, I say, wake up and let me have a look at you."

He shook the man on the floor, but the eyes did not show a sign of life.

"You will never try this man for murder," said the detective. "He's dead."

"I guess not—dead drunk, you mean."

"Drunken men breathe; this man does not."

It was true.

They carried Jupiter out of the little cell and laid him in the full light.

Life had fled and the man-tiger of the metropolis would never answer to man for his last fight with the long blade nor tell the story of the black cord.

In the dim light of the cell he had died suddenly, thus cheating justice of her own and failing to keep his promise to his master.

Solon Shook went back and looked at the knife.

He had seen it before, and as he looked he recalled his adventure in the house to which Oliver Onyx and Coral had gone, and he again lived over the brief and almost fatal struggle with Jupiter.

"Can I have this?" he asked, picking up the black cord.

"Take it for the present. It may prove a clue."

"It may hang somebody," was the reply as the clue-finder pocketed the cord.

Whose blood was on the blade found upon Jupiter's person?

What heart had the man split with the keen-edged knife?

Solon Shook thought rapidly as he walked from the station-house.

"He hated Spiders," he said. "There was a deadly feud between them and they may have met. Spiders hated Jupiter with the same unconquerable power so there was no love lost."

He turned down a little street and stopped at Spiders's door.

He knocked, but there was no response.

In another minute the door had opened at the turn of the knob and the detective was inside.

The lamp still burned over the staircase and he fell back a step as he saw some one lying on the floor.

"I see! Jupiter found Spiders," said the detective, and he stooped over the body and looked down into the bloodless face.

Half a minute later he had opened a door alongside the hall and had placed the body on a bed.

"Is he here yet?" came from the lips of Spiders.

"No, he will never strike again."

"That's good. Why, he came in like a whirlwind and in an instant I saw what a fool I was to let him off when I had him at my hand. I should have killed him then but foolishly I let the dog bark and bite again."

Spiders was not dead, but the knife had tried to take his life, guided, as it was, by the hand of Jupiter.

He was taken to the hospital and as Solon turned to go the hand beckoned him to the cot.

"I know by their looks that it's all up with Spiders," he said. "Jupiter's dead, you tell me. Now, you can take the last one of the three; you can make Major Bullion give up the Tarsian gems."

"He must do more than that," muttered the clue-finder as with another look he turned away from Spiders, the elegant.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE TWO BLACK CORDS.

DAY broke again over Gotham.

There were few who knew anything of the events of the past night, and they were inclined to keep the secret.

A handsome man, who wore a pale and anxious face, sat smoking in a sumptuous room, and cast eager glances toward the door which did not open.

It was evident that this man had passed a sleepless night, for he was nervous.

Ever and anon he knocked the ashes from his cigar, and once or twice in doing so burned his finger.

The sun rose higher and higher, gilding the spires of the temples of worship, and falling into the dark places of the dark alleys.

Still no one came.

"No Spiders, no Jupiter," said he at last, throwing the cigar into the grate and rising. "I can go down and see where they are. I can't stand this."

Half a minute later, enveloped in an overcoat, for the morning was cool, he emerged from the house and stood undecided a moment on the step.

"Jupiter went off, saying that he would find the ferret before morning, and I have a right to expect his report by this time. But I might lose him by going out, even though I find Spiders at his lodgings."

He did not turn back, however, but went away and vanished round the nearest corner.

An hour later he came back with a troubled face, and opened the door with a trembling hand.

It seemed to him that he was in the shadow of doom.

"I can take the gems and make off with them, and if I thought I had been betrayed by Jupiter or deserted by Spiders I can play out a little hand of my own and keep all I've got."

Major Bullion passed on to the room he had lately left, in which he found a cheerful odor of warmth, and dropped into the velveted chair.

"Something's wrong. This silence means more than I can see. Has the man of clues outwitted both Jupiter and Spiders? Is this the end of the fight for the million in jewels—the exiled queen's treasure? If I thought it was I'd— But pshaw! I won't. I'll wait a little longer. There's time enough for this," and he opened a ring that glittered on his finger and exposed a white substance in the gold setting that seemed to shine like salts.

"There can be no failure in the end—ferret or no ferret," he went on after a moment's pause. "The gems are mine yet."

He went to a certain part of the room and touched a concealed button in the wall.

The pressure opened a little door into which he eagerly ran his hand to draw out something well wrapped and tied.

With a smile of triumph on his face he came back to the table and resumed the chair.

"They're worth plotting for," said he. "Who wouldn't fight for a fortune like this? Jupiter shall have his share when we are all out of the woods, and Spiders shall be paid for his aid. But the lion's share is to be mine—it belongs to me, for I hatched the plot; I found out where the gems were; I discovered Saul Tarsus, the man who came up from the South with the queen's ransom in his possession, and the powers that be shall not take these from us."

While he talked thus he was opening the packet and at the last word the last paper fell away from the contents of the package.

The next moment a cry of horror parted his lips and sinking back into the chair he turned deathly white and glared at a lot of pebbles which lay on the cloth.

"Gone! gone! gone!" he almost shrieked. "The hand of the spoiler has been here. I have been robbed by those I trusted most. Jupiter, the thief by nature, has turned against me. No wonder I failed to find him. I have been plundered by the vultures I took into my employ; but he shall pay for it all. He shall restore every gem or pay for this work with his life. I have the death-agent at my command. I have the cord that kills—I, Gon Docra, of the East!"

Major Bullion sprung up and still staring at the pebbles flashed from an inner pocket a black cord which he fingered with a murderer's eagerness.

"They don't know me. Others have found me out to their everlasting peril. They thought I wouldn't kill, but they know

otherwise now. Jupiter may have thought that to rob me was to tie my hands, and after all he may have leagued himself with Spiders for an even divide. Ah, I am still here. I am still ready for the fight, and from now it shall be a hunt for blood, the gems to the winds till it has ended."

He stopped suddenly and turned quickly toward the door.

It seemed to him that there were footsteps on the stairs.

That meant much to Major Bullion.

With bated breath he watched the door and even fell back clutching the black cord with tremulous fingers and scarcely daring to gasp for air.

A second passed.

"It may have been imagination," he muttered. "Who could come down stairs without getting in at the front door first? Major Bullion, you must be Gon Docra from this moment. You—"

The knob turned and the door opened.

It was not imagination this time, and the man in the room recoiled another pace with his gaze riveted upon the two men who had crossed the threshold.

He knew them both.

But instead of looking at the foremost one his gaze settled on the other and all at once he flew forward with the cord poised above his head.

"You are the thief!" he cried. "You have come back after the gems and you have them."

Saul Tarsus, whose figure touched the door as he fell back from the onslaught of the discovered thug, threw up his hand and laughed:

"I was bound to get them, major. I could not be kept out of them forever, and with your men out of the game, I thought I would come and rob the nest."

The arm was caught by the other person, and Major Bullion was pushed across the room and made to reseal himself by the hand of Solon Shook.

"We came to the nest and found it empty," calmly said the clue-finder. "The presence of the gems which we found by searching told us that you had not gone away for good, so we waited for you. You know me, Gon Docra."

At this every vestige of color fled from the face upturned to the detective's, and the hand of Major Bullion was thrown toward his mouth.

"The ring! the ring!" cried Tarsus. "He can wrench it open with his teeth and get the poison."

But already the hand of Solon Shook had prevented the very act the prisoner sought to carry out and Tarsus manacled him in the chair.

The black cord which had fallen from the American thug's grasp lay on the table and Solon picked it up.

"We can match this, major," he said, looking at the prisoner. "I have its mate here. See!"

The clue-finder drew from his pocket a cord exactly like the one he had taken from the table and held both up together.

"Jupiter has betrayed me!" cried the thug, turning almost black in the face. "I had a chance at his throat more than once, but I refrained."

"Jupiter, living, betrayed no one, but Jupiter dead let the secret out?"

"Jupiter dead?"

"Yes. The cord which Jupiter found in the Coop the night Jen was murdered is in my hand and its mate hangs beside it. You don't deny the crime, Gon Docra?"

There was no answer, but the face fell and the hands of Major Bullion twitched nervously.

"Mother Bluebottle heard you that night," continued the detective. "She knew your step and she felt that you had come to the Coop for a purpose."

"Mother Bluebottle? You mean Margaret Minx."

"No matter which name you choose to give her, she heard you when you came to kill Jericho Jen, her child and your fate, with the black cord."

"I didn't go thither for that purpose!" he exclaimed. "I didn't expect to find the girl in that room, but she knew me the moment I opened the door, and I had to make the cast or lose all. So she heard me and never inter-

fered. She might have saved her offspring."

Major Bullion said no more, but Solon Shook spread before him a few sheets of paper which had been rolled up and he started at sight of them.

"She gave you those, eh?" he asked. "Long ago I lost those sheets and I always suspected her. She stole them."

"Never mind, she had them safe where you would never have hunted for them. They are the secret chapters in the life of Gon Docra; they are in part his own story of his connection with thuggee."

"And my death-warrant," came through the clinched teeth of the doomed man. "This is the end of the trail for you, Solon Shook; but I'll give you the life you have netted by your wiles for a moment's freedom with that man before me."

He turned to look at Tarsus, but that person was reading the scrawl on one of the yellow sheets and did not see the glance which would have killed had it been a bullet.

Three months after these events a man walked through a prison corridor walled with stone with a tread as firm as if he was passing down a deserted street.

Not a muscle moved.

The newspapers had been full of Gon Docra and his crimes.

They had published the startling story of his life, and the Tarsian gems had been described again and again.

But this man was the last of the diamond league.

This man, marching under guard to a felon's death, with his hands reddened with a poor girl's blood, was showing off in the warm sunlight that came in through the prison windows to light him to the noose which he had escaped too long.

It was the long-delayed triumph of justice, the vengeance of the law which the cunning and perseverance of Solon Shook, the clue-finder, had brought about, and when the law had taken its course, and the outside world knew that the American disciple of that dread league nurtured under an Eastern sun was dead, it turned to praise him for his work.

Parry Spiders died from the wound received by Jupiter Junk, the tiger of the game, and "the Elegant" slept in his fine clothes in the Potter's Field.

Mother Bluebottle lived to go into court and tell the story of Gon Docra, who had masqueraded as "Major Bullion," and with her testimony she vanished to give up life in the Coop with the resolve to mend her ways, which she did.

Tarsus, the owner of the famous gems, locked them up where they would be safe, but not until he had sold enough to supply all his future wants.

"Some one shall wear them by and by," said he to Solon Shook. "I know a neck that is white and fair, and they shall glitter there one of these days."

He kept his word, and when Coral came to the altar with her lover, Roger Rex, the man who had been hunted for the jewels took them from their hiding-place, and with his own hands hung them about her neck, at the same time saying:

"They're yours, Coral, and may they bring you more happiness than they brought others."

It turned out as Tarsus wished, for not a cloud has obscured the life of Coral Onyx; and now and then Mother Bluebottle drops in upon the pair to meet there at odd times a man whom she knows very well—Solon Shook, the Clue-Finder of Gotham.

It was a long trail and an exciting one, but he avenged the cruel murder of Jericho Jen, and discovered the wielder of the Black Cord in New York.

THE END.

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